



Department
for Education

Speaking from experience: the views of the first cohort of trainees of Step Up to Social Work

Research Report

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Contents

Table of figures	5
Acknowledgements	7
Executive Summary	8
Background to Step Up to Social Work and the evaluation	8
Background of respondents	8
Views on recruitment processes, regional partnerships, local authorities and universities	9
Preparation for practice	9
Preparation for working as a social worker	10
Trainees' reflections	11
1. Background	13
1.1 The Step Up to Social Work Programme	13
1.2 The evaluation	14
2. Methodology and reporting	18
2.1 Longitudinal study	18
2.2 Development of instruments	18
2.3 Distribution of instruments	19
2.4 Response rates at T1, T2, T3 and T4	20
2.5 Analysis and reporting	21
3. Profile of respondents	23
3.1 Background	23
3.2 Location of respondent	23
3.3 Age profile of respondents	24
3.4 Educational qualifications	25
3.5 Employment background	27

3.6 Consideration of social work as a career	30
4. Recruitment: awareness, application, assessment and allocation processes	31
4.1 Awareness of the programme	31
4.2 Experience of the assessment process	33
4.3 Views on the allocation process	34
5. Support for trainees from regional partnerships	36
5.1 Trainees' overall satisfaction with support from regional partnership	36
5.2 Trainee satisfaction with regional partnerships in the early months (T2)	40
5.3 Trainee satisfaction with regional partnerships at T3 and T4	41
5.4 Overview	43
6. Trainees' satisfaction with support from their local authority	44
6. 1 Trainees' overall satisfaction with support from their local authority	44
6.2 Trainee satisfaction with their local authority in the early months (T2)	47
6.3 Trainee satisfaction with their local authority at T3 and T4	48
6.4 Overview	49
7. Trainees' satisfaction with support from the universities	51
7.1 Trainees' overall satisfaction with support from the two accrediting universities	51
7.2 Trainees' satisfaction with the accrediting universities where registered	52
7.3 Trainees' satisfaction with support from other delivery universities	59
7.4 Overview	63
8. Preparation for practice	65
8.1 Preparation for practice: academic input	65
8.1.1 Trainees' overall satisfaction with academic input	65
8.1.2 Trainees' satisfaction with academic input at T2	68
8.1.3 Trainees' satisfaction with academic input at T3	68
8.1.4 Trainees' satisfaction with academic input at T4	71

8.2 Preparation for practice: practice input	74
8.2.1 Trainees' overall satisfaction with practice input	74
8.2.2 Trainees' satisfaction with practice input at T2	75
8.2.3 Trainees' satisfaction with practice input at T3	76
8.2.4 Trainees' satisfaction with practice input at T4	80
8.3 Integration of theory and practice	81
8.4 Overview	86
9. Preparation for specific aspects of social work	87
9.1 Feeling prepared for practice: T3 and T4	87
9.2 Feeling prepared for practice: Variations across partnerships	94
10. Trainees' reflections at the end of the training	104
10.1 What they are doing	104
10.2 What went well?	104
10.3 What had not gone well?	106
10.4 Trainees' final reflections	106
References	115

Table of figures

Table 1 Delivery of the Step Up to Social Work programme	16
Table 2 Questionnaires: Timing, focus and response rates	21
Table 3 Respondents from regional partnerships	23
Table 4 Age profile of respondents	24
Table 5 Gender profile of respondents	25
Table 6 Classification of respondents' first degrees	26
Table 7 Relevant academic qualifications	27
Table 8 Previous experience	28
Table 8a Previous experience – Cohort 1 (C1) and Cohort 2 (C2) compared	28
Table 9 Extent of relevant experience of respondents	29
Table 10 Awareness of Step Up	31
Table 11 Overall satisfaction with support from regional partnerships at T2, T3 and T4	36
Table 12 Satisfaction with support from regional partnerships – breakdown	38
Table 13 Overall satisfaction with support from local authorities at T2, T3 and T4	44
Table 14 Satisfaction with support from local authorities – breakdown	45
Table 15 Satisfaction with support from accrediting university	51
Table 16 Satisfaction with support from universities where registered – breakdown	53
Table 17 Satisfaction with support from Manchester Metropolitan University by delivery – breakdown	55
Table 18 Satisfaction with support from Salford University by delivery – breakdown	56
Table 19 Satisfaction with the other delivery universities	59
Table 20 Satisfaction with support from other delivery universities – breakdown from T1, T2 and T3	60
Table 21 Satisfaction with academic input – overall	65
Table 22 Satisfaction with academic input – breakdown	66

Table 23 Satisfaction with practice input – overall	75
Table 24 Satisfaction with practice input– breakdown	78
Table 25 Views on integration of theory and practice	82
Table 26 Summary table of trainees’ perceptions of preparation	88
Table 27 Proportion feeling adequately prepared for aspects of social work at T3	90
Table 28 Proportion feeling adequately prepared for aspects of social work at T4	90
Table 29 Commentary on responses concerning preparation for the 13 aspects	92
Table 30 Overall proportions feeling well prepared or very well prepared at T4	95
Table 31 Proportion saying well prepared / very well prepared across the regional partnerships (1)	97
Table 32 Proportion saying well prepared / very well prepared across the regional partnerships (2)	100
Table 33 Destinations after completion of Step Up to Social Work training	105

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Executive Summary

Background to Step Up to Social Work and the evaluation

The first two cohorts of the Step Up to Social Work (Step Up) programme have followed a master level training route into social work. The programme was intended to attract high achieving candidates into the social work profession while giving employers a greater say in the training of these candidates. Eight regional partnerships were formed which brought together 42 local authorities. Two universities - Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and University of Salford - were appointed to work with regional partnerships to devise the curriculum, validate the training provision in line with the then General Social Care Council's requirements and grant the master's degree. Each regional partnership was linked with one of two universities. Four of the eight appointed local universities to provide the training and the other four worked directly with either MMU or the University of Salford. The first cohort of 185 trainees started their training in September 2010 after a national recruitment and assessment process.

This evaluation was designed to capture the experiences of the first cohort of trainees and the work has continued with those in Cohort Two. While a limited amount of feedback from that group is included in the report the main focus is on Cohort One. Four questionnaires were distributed to Cohort One participants; this was done just before they embarked on the training, after six and 12 months, and then at the end of the 18 months. Response rates varied but were very good for a study of this type: 78 per cent; 71 per cent; 64 per cent and 71 per cent. The data are reported in terms of the number of respondents to the questionnaires rather than the whole cohort.

Background of respondents

All applicants were required to have at least an upper second class degree and relevant experience of working with children and families, either in an employed or volunteering capacity. Fifteen per cent of Cohort 1 respondents had obtained a first class degree at the end of their undergraduate studies and 64 per cent had previous qualifications in areas relevant to social work. Thirteen per cent of respondents had a professional qualification, most commonly in teaching or youth and community work, and 82 per cent were employed in a post which could be considered relevant to social work when they applied for a place on Step Up. Just under 20 per cent had ten years or more paid relevant employment and / voluntary work experience. Despite the fact that the majority said they had considered a career in social work it was evident from their comments that the overwhelming majority of this group would not have followed a career in social work without being able to access Step Up.

Views on recruitment processes, regional partnerships, local authorities and universities

The trainees rated the recruitment, application and assessment centre process highly, but they had significant concerns about the administration of the processes. They were generally satisfied with the support they received from the regional partnerships, although this did vary considerably across the partnerships. There was a clear correlation between trainees' levels of satisfaction and whether or not they believed that questions or concerns they had regarding any part of the programme had been dealt with in an appropriate manner. A higher level of dissatisfaction was clearly linked to trainees feeling they were being treated as 'students' rather than emerging professionals, and to situations where they considered their opinions had not been taken into account and / or where they had been excluded from discussions.

There was a higher level of satisfaction with their local authorities than with their regional partnerships, although this varied over time and was again closely associated with the quality of support and communication that trainees considered they were receiving. On occasions they transferred the frustrations they felt over problems they were experiencing with regional partnerships, such as delays over payment of bursaries or expenses, to their local authorities. By the time they completed the training their concerns focused on whether or not they would find a post in their authorities or elsewhere.

Throughout the training respondents were more likely to be satisfied with the support they received when the university where they were registered was also delivering the course. Not surprisingly trainees were more positive where they considered the programme was being organized well and taught by lecturers that were interesting, knowledgeable and enthusiastic, as well as being accessible and responsive. They were far less sympathetic where they considered there had been poor organisation and too many deficits around the academic input.

Preparation for practice

The level of satisfaction with the practice element of the Step Up programme was much higher than that expressed in relation to the academic input. While trainees acknowledged and appreciated their involvement in a new and innovative training route and the implications of this for those in universities and children's services department, they expressed concern and anxiety at a number of elements of the course.

Trainees were most likely to be satisfied with the academic input when they considered it to have been pitched at an appropriately high level for this type of intensive programme. The input on Law emerged as a popular and usually well-taught aspect of the course in all settings. Trainees were able to make the connection between its content and application to future practice which contrasted with the feedback on the input on research methods, which they usually considered had not been well-taught, had not been linked

with practice or the provision of evidence and not helpful over how they should approach their own research for their dissertations or extended essays.

Respondents had expected the course to be demanding because it was six months shorter than any other Master's route into social work and had expected to have to undertake additional reading on and around subjects. But there were complaints about failures to structure the course to take account of the fact that they were employer rather than university based. Their suggestions included blocking teaching on specific days, not expecting trainees to come in for one lecture or group session and that taking steps to avoid cancellations would free time for private study and relieve some of the pressure of the programme. Given the reliance on remote learning and accessing websites for materials and information there were too many complaints about inefficient IT systems.

Most trainees enjoyed their placements and felt well supported by practitioners. The highest levels of satisfaction were evident where the practice educators understood the principles and structure of Step Up and where trainees had been able to discuss the relationship between theory and an intervention or assessment. For most trainees the placements provided an opportunity to understand the reality of social work practice and what it would mean for their personal development. A successful placement was considered to be one that was well planned and where their time had been used well; it also included regular and thorough supervision sessions, with opportunities for their own assumptions and approaches to be challenged. There were, however, two areas of concern that emerged across most partnerships. The first related to the difficulties that arose when there was a general lack of awareness and understanding in the teams where they were placed both about the nature of Step Up and the structure of the programme. The second focused on a failure to acknowledge previous experience. Trainees were required to have experience of working with children and families to gain a place on the programme, but particularly those with extensive experience did not feel it had always been used to best effect, especially when it came to deciding what they could do whilst on placements.

Preparation for working as a social worker

By the end of the training the percentages of respondents feeling prepared in relation to various aspects of social work were :

- 90 per cent relation to social work values, issues of power and discrimination, anti-oppressive practice, social work with children and families, context of social work, social work theory and methods, application of social knowledge, Interpersonal communication and the legal system.
- 80 per cent in relation to social work roles and responsibilities, human growth and development and research methods / evaluation.
- just under 60 per cent for work with adults.

There were, however, significant differences in the responses of trainees from different regional partnerships, as there was in their responses in relation to tasks that they would be expected to perform.

The overall percentages for those who felt well prepared for a list of tasks were, however, as follows:

- 82 per cent to work effectively with families
- 80 per cent to reflect on practice
- 78 per cent to assess need
- 78 per cent to work effectively with individuals
- 72 per cent to assess and manage risk
- 65 per cent to develop plans
- 55 per cent to work effectively with groups.

Respondents were also asked to say how well they thought they had been prepared overall to practise as a newly qualified social worker. Overall 96 per cent of respondents thought they had been very adequately or adequately prepared.

Trainees' reflections

Towards the end of the course respondents said their anxieties related in particular to the limited employment opportunities available to them on completion of Step Up. Only one regional partnership had guaranteed posts to those who successfully completed the course. Their trainees had been required to sign an agreement at the beginning of the training to say they would accept a post if they were offered one or repay the salary they had been paid. In other partnerships trainees were invited to apply for a post where there were vacancies. However 111 of the 119 respondents (93 per cent) to the final questionnaire had secured posts as social workers, while others were taking a short break or were still uncertain whether they had a job or not. Overall of the 185 who embarked on Step Up 168 completed the course (91 per cent) and it is now known that 82 per cent are employed as social workers. This represents a very high conversion rate where the latest reliable figure puts the national figure at 54 per cent (see GSCC, 2010).

Despite the criticisms outlined above trainees considered the experiences gained whilst on placement to have been invaluable in providing an insight into practice and they also identified aspects of the academic support that they had received throughout the course as a particular strength of the programme. However, poor communication between all or

some of the parties involved in Step Up and a lack of clarity over arrangements and processes were highlighted as areas that needed further attention.

When trainees were invited to contribute final comments the majority said how much they had enjoyed the experience. Many said how privileged they felt to have been accepted and often apologised for any negative comments they made. It remains to be seen how many of Cohort 1 will be in practice in two, three or five years and it is to be hoped that future contacts with this cohort will reveal that information.

1. Background

1.1 The Step Up to Social Work Programme

The Step Up to Social Work (usually referred to as Step Up in this report) training route was launched in the autumn of 2009, and the first cohort started in September 2010. It was intended to:

- improve the quality of social workers entering the profession
- enable local employers to shape initial training for students to address local needs.

It was aimed at:

- attracting high achieving candidates into the social work profession, with the expectation that they will have the skills and experience necessary to train as social workers working with families and children;
- allowing employers to play a significant role in the training of these candidates, in partnership with accredited higher education institutions (HEI) providers.

The programme is designed to allow trainees to complete a master's degree in social work within 18 months with the possibility of taking account of prior learning. It was also intended to give local authority employers significantly more influence over the content of the initial training of social workers. The speed with which the programme had to be introduced possibly compromised their ability to be able to do so, although there is evidence that this has become more significant as time passes. Eight regional partnerships, comprising various numbers of local authorities but 42 in total, agreed to host the trainees. Recruitment for the programme began in February 2010 and over 2000 applications were received. Trainees were selected through a rigorous screening process that culminated in their attendance at one-day regional assessment centres. The selection process was supported by a recruitment agency. This agency, alongside local authorities, higher education institutions (HEIs) and service users were involved in the selection process. Over 200 offers of places on the programme were made and 185 successful trainees – Cohort 1 – embarked on the programme in September 2010.

Regional partnerships differed in their organisation. The academic or theoretical input was provided either by one of the accrediting HEI or by a separate delivery HEI, with the accrediting HEI quality assuring the input. The structure of each partnership is illustrated in Table 1. Each trainee was based in a local authority within a regional partnership, where they completed their practice placements. Trainees were allocated to a 'Host Team' where they undertook their final placement. The intention was to develop a work-based learning framework, which incorporated skills development opportunities managed by someone assuming the role of a 'Learner Guide' or a similar role.

Two HEIs – Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and Salford University – were commissioned to accredit the training provision in line with the then General Social Care Council (GSCC) requirements and quality assure the programme. Salford produced ‘module delivery packs’, where the aims, learning outcomes and curriculum content of each part of the programme were outlined. There was guidance provided on delivery and learning methods but this was very flexible so that it could be adopted where local delivery HEIs were involved. MMU’s approach was different in that it specified the content of modules more precisely. A further difference between the two universities was that Salford designed its offer around three placements of 40, 60 and 100 days whereas MMU built in two 100 day placements.

1.2 The evaluation

This evaluation captures the feedback of trainees in the first Step Up programme from the time when they embarked on the training in summer 2010 until the point at which they qualified as social workers in March 2012. The evaluation is intended to:

- support a wider decision on whether or not the programme represents efficient use of resources in relation to the training of social workers;
- demonstrate the extent to which the programme has achieved its objectives;
- inform any future implementation.

This has been a rare opportunity to follow a group of trainees through their training to become social workers and to have achieved such high response rates. As well as the specific information it provides on Step Up it also gives a rare insight into the views of trainees as they proceed through social work training, both on their experiences and on the professional training in general and, as such, complements the work of the Social Care Workforce Research Unit on the evaluation of the Social Work degree (Social Care Workforce Research Unit, 2008). An evaluation of the Step Up programme has been conducted by De Montfort University (Smith et al., 2013). One of the limitations of the responses reported in this report is that it is based exclusively on trainees’ self-reporting and did not include the views of tutors, practice guides / teachers / supervisors or others with whom the trainees will have had contact. However a strength of the report is that it captures the experiences of trainees at four points over the 18 months and provides insights that will contribute to the development of the Step up to Social Work programme specifically and potentially to social work education and training in general. But it is also worth considering the potential impact of the trainees’ immediate experiences as they completed their questionnaires and the breadth of their reported experiences over time. One limitation arising from a questionnaire method is that it is not always possible to determine how much respondents are focusing on one current preoccupation – here a single slice of the programme - and how much were they are building a summative picture as time develops. Many teachers in different sectors will be aware of the phases

that people go through when on a course – the excitement, enthusiasm, high level of motivation in the first few weeks, followed by weariness, sense of the shine becoming tarnished, fault-finding, followed (for many but not all) by a more positive but more realistic view of what to expect from the course and themselves. All of this can be detected, although not always sequentially. The same might be said of initiatives and pilots more generally.

The Step Up to Social Work programme was introduced at great pace. The work was approved in October 2009 and the first trainees started training in September 2010. During this time regional partnerships were established, courses received approval, arrangements were made with other delivery partners and candidates were recruited. It was a significant achievement but it is not surprising that not everything would be in place and that there would need to be aspects that would need to be addressed. The trainees' views have turned the spotlight on many of these, but they also highlight what has had a positive impact and concluded how well prepared they feel to practice as newly qualified social workers.

Table 1 Delivery of the Step Up to Social Work programme

Regional Partnership	Local authorities¹	Number of Trainees	Lead / accrediting HEI	Delivery HEI
Central Bedfordshire and Luton	Central Bedfordshire Luton	6	University of Salford	University of Bedfordshire
East	Norfolk Cambridgeshire Suffolk Southend Thurrock	25	Manchester Metropolitan University	Manchester Metropolitan University
East Midlands	Leicester Derby Nottingham Northamptonshire Nottinghamshire	25	Manchester Metropolitan University	Manchester Metropolitan University
Greater Manchester	Salford Bolton Bury Manchester	15	University of Salford	University of Salford
Learn Together Partnership (LTP)	Wirral Halton Sefton	38	Manchester Metropolitan	Chester University

¹ Lead authorities are shown in bold

(Greater Merseyside)	Knowsley Liverpool	St Helens Warrington		University	
West London Alliance (WLA)	Hammersmith & Fulham Brent Ealing Harrow	Hillingdon Hounslow Westminster	33	University of Salford	University of Hertfordshire
West Midlands	Coventry Solihull Warwickshire		9	Manchester Metropolitan University	Coventry University
Yorkshire and Humberside	Sheffield Calderdale East Riding Kirklees Leeds	North Lincolnshire North Yorkshire Rotherham	31	University of Salford	University of Salford

2. Methodology and reporting

2.1 Longitudinal study

This longitudinal study draws on data collected through four surveys that have allowed the evaluators to collect data from the trainees throughout the course. Ruspini (1999) defines the characteristics of a longitudinal study as one where:

- data are collected for each item or variable for two or more distinct periods;
- the subjects or cases analysed are the same or broadly comparable;
- the analysis involves some comparison of data between or among periods.

All three elements were present in this study. Common themes running through the questionnaires enabled the data to be compared over time. There was a good response rate at each time period and although not everyone answered at every stage it is still possible to be confident that the quantitative data provide a reliable measure.

Longitudinal studies may be retrospective (asking participants to reflect on experiences) or contemporary (where data is collected on the current situation). This study combined elements of both. The first questionnaire asked the successful candidates to reflect on their experiences of applying for and being recruited onto Step Up, so it was a retrospective exercise. The other three questionnaires collected feedback on their contemporary experiences but they also asked respondents to reflect on the periods between questionnaires as well as on their immediate situation. It is debatable how easy any respondent may have found reflection when engaged in an exercise such as this, given the tendency for all of us to be influenced by our immediate experiences. This is perhaps even more acute for those following a challenging professional training course.

2.2 Development of instruments

Good survey questions must be feasible to answer and respondents must be willing to answer them (Fowler, 1995). The selection of questions is an essential factor in ensuring that the evaluation provides reliable data (see Marsh and Roche, 2000. Ory and Ryan (2001) write that 'to make valid inferences about student ratings of instruction, the rating items must be relevant to and representative of the processes, strategies, and knowledge domain of teaching quality' (p. 32). In this case the questions had to reflect the organisational, academic and practice aspects of Step Up to provide valid measures. To do this the researchers consulted with and took advice from those with knowledge of the various components of the Step Up programme. Once they were drafted they were shared with a small group of Step Up trainees to ensure that words and meanings were understood (cognitive testing); respondents interpret the question in the same way; the

response choices and ranges were appropriate; and to check the clarity of instructions and time taken to complete.

Qualitative feedback is primarily used for formative, rather than summative, purposes which made it well suited to this evaluation (see Franklin, 2001; Lewis, 2001). Harper and Kuh (2007) note that including a qualitative element in student assessments of courses often allows issues to emerge that would remain hidden if quantitative methods alone were applied. This is a view supported by Sinclair (2000). Although he was referring to the evaluation of interventions it is also relevant to the evaluation of a programme such as Step Up to Social Work:

Qualitative research draws attention to features of a situation that others may have missed but which once seen have major implications for practice ... in combination with simple statistical description, it can lead to an informed and incisive evaluation of programmes in social services. (Sinclair, 2000, p8)

2.3 Distribution of instruments

In mid-August 2010 a questionnaire was sent to the email addresses of all those who had been offered a place on the Step Up training route for social work and who had accepted the places at that point (n = 189), although only 184 started the training in September.² It had originally been hoped to receive responses by early September but possibly in light of the pressures on many candidates as they left previous employment, took holidays and moved home several reminders were sent during September and early October. The respondents were asked for *permission to re-contact* at this stage; where someone asked not to be involved in the evaluation their name was removed from the dataset. However, if someone did not respond at any stage they were included in subsequent distributions.

The report uses the shorthand terms T1, T2, T3 and T4 to reference the four data points (see Table 2 below). Similar questionnaires were sent to trainees in February 2011, September 2011 and March 2012, by which time the trainees had completed the programme. At T1, T2 and T3 the respondents received the questionnaire as an email attachment and regular, personally directed email reminders were sent. At T4 respondents received an email with the questionnaire attached but if they preferred they could complete it online instead but the responses were merged into one data file. It is not clear if the two modes of distribution had any impact on the response rate, which returned to the T2 level at T4 (see below)³. It would be interesting to undertake some

² Five candidates did not take up their places because they made another career choice or for family / personal reasons

³ Studies using the web for surveying general populations have had significantly lower web response rates than those surveying particular sub-populations (See Dex and Gamy, 2011). It is not clear if this holds true for studies of smaller, defined populations.

further exploration on any potential impact and to explore preferences for completion if this cohort is followed into the early career stage.

At every stage respondents were told that the data would be reported without identifiers and no individual would be identified, either directly or indirectly. All those approached to take part were made aware of why the evaluation was being conducted and of its importance. They were also told what their participation would involve and given an assurance that all information collected from individuals would be kept strictly confidential (subject to the usual legal limitations) and confidentiality, privacy and anonymity would be ensured in the collection, storage and publication of research material. Assurances were given to respondents that only anonymised research data would be archived and the information they supplied would not be used in any way that would allow identification of individuals. Consent was implied by participants returning the questionnaire and providing a preferred email or postal address. However at each stage questionnaires were sent to all those who had been awarded a Step Up place, irrespective of whether they had completed the previous questionnaire, unless a request was made not to take part. Only three people made such a request although there were various requests for help with or intercession over specific issues.

2.4 Response rates at T1, T2, T3 and T4

As explained above, the first questionnaire was distributed in August 2010 just before the training started. By mid-October 144 responses had been received from a potential pool of the 184 trainees who had embarked on the training, representing 78 per cent of the cohort. The second round of questionnaires was distributed in February 2011 and the response rate was 71 per cent. In all regional partnerships, except for the East Midlands, approximately three-quarters of all trainees responded. It is difficult to detect any obvious reason for the lower proportion responding in the East Midlands, although it stayed consistently low throughout the evaluation. It would be interesting to know if those who did not reply differed in any way or held significantly different views from respondents that led them to conclude they had little to contribute – or if there was another reason. At the third questionnaire point in September 2011 the response rate fell to 64 per cent with a reduction across all regional partnerships except in the East and in West London. Only one third of trainees from the Greater Manchester partnership and half of those in the East Midlands responded. It is only possible to speculate about the reasons for the lower response rate at Round 3. This may have been related to the increased pressures of academic and practice work or even a dip in enthusiasm and energy. The fourth questionnaire was distributed in March 2012. Despite concerns that this was the time when trainees would be completing final pieces of course work and possibly preparing for a break before taking up a post the response rate returned to 71 per cent (see Table 2).

Table 2 Questionnaires: Timing, focus and response rates

T1	August 2010	Feedback on the approaches used to the application, assessment and allocation processes	78 %
T2	February 2011	Feedback on the first six months of training	71%
T3	September 2011	Feedback on months seven to twelve	64%
T4	March 2012	Feedback on the final six months of training	71%

2.5 Analysis and reporting

Quantitative data from the survey were coded and inputted into the SPSS version 15 for Windows computer software package for statistical analysis. The analysis of quantitative data included investigation of frequencies, cross-tabulations and some statistical testing. The responses to the questionnaires were entered onto four separate SPSS files for analysis. Many of the questions at all four stages asked for a response to be explained or for further information to be provided. It is important to remember that the percentages quoted in this report relate to the respondents to the questionnaire and not the whole cohort.

Respondents' free text comments have added a considerable level of insight into many of the topics covered. It is extremely difficult to quantify such data appropriately – and researchers / evaluators would criticise any attempt to do so. However, without some guidance it is not possible for a reader to assess the context or the degree to which the issues raised applied to a sufficiently large proportion of respondents to be able to draw some reliable conclusions. An attempt has been made to do this throughout the report but the authors recognise its inadequacy. It is arguable that without such an attempt the data become meaningless. Furthermore, as Dohan and Sanchez-Jankowski (1998) note, there is a risk that researchers may use those data that are more sensational and then present them as being the most significant. Policy makers and other readers need the assurance that the data reported represent an accurate account of people's experiences. This required a robust and transparent approach to the analysis of all data.

It is a feature of qualitative analysis that the analytical process begins during data collection as the researchers develop hypotheses and examine emerging lines of inquiry in further depth. While there are software packages that help in organising, rather than analysing, responses to open-ended questions, by reading and rereading the text and

searching for 'patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes that shape qualitative texts into research texts' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 133) the codes emerge. A coding framework was developed for each set of comments. The framework was based on aligning the comments with the options available for the quantitative data and recording the responses as positive, negative or mixed. It also allowed significance to be attached to the themes and patterns that emerged. As a result reporting could reflect the extent to which a particular comment fitted in with the range of responses and could represent any unusual or more dramatic incident within that context.

In most instances where direct quotations from responses are used they represent the sentiments expressed by those commenting on a particular issue. In most cases they reflect a substantial proportion of respondents but in a few instances they have been used to reflect a minority voice or to provide further details about a particularly significant event. Where this is the case it is made clear to the reader. In line with the assurance of confidentiality, care has been taken to ensure that quotes or events are not linked to any personal information that can identify any individual.

One of the eight regional partnerships engaged in Cohort 1 chose not to take part in Cohort 2 but three other partnerships joined the programme. A total of 54 local authorities were then engaged. Trainees in Cohort 2 of Step Up to Social Work embarked on the training in February 2012. They are also being followed through their training at the same frequencies as Cohort 1 and the data will be reported towards the end of 2013. However, at the time of writing, Cohort 2 trainees have completed two questionnaires and the key messages emerging have been inserted where relevant throughout this report. It is appropriate to report the key issues emerging from those data as they may contribute to planning for Cohort 3. Where it is important for details of Cohort 2 to be provided they are inserted in grey in tables or in boxes or tables shaded grey.

3. Profile of respondents

3.1 Background

This section details the profile of those completing questionnaires at T1. A similar profiling exercise was not completed at all stages. While not everyone continued to complete at every round, the majority did so.

3.2 Location of respondent

At least two-thirds of each regional partnership's trainees responded to the questionnaire, with higher responses received from those in four partnerships: Greater Manchester, LTP, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humberside (Table 3). This level of response was maintained with Cohort 2.

Table 3 Respondents from regional partnerships

	Successful candidates at Cohorts 1 and 2 – totals and number completing questionnaire at T1			
	Cohort 1 Total	Cohort 1 Completion s	Cohort 2 Total	Cohort 2 Completion s
Central Beds / Luton ⁴ (and Hertfordshire)	6	4	18	15
East	25	17	20	17
East Midlands	25	17	34	17
Greater Manchester	16	13	15	10
Learn Together Partnership	39	34	24	14
West London Alliance	33	23	27	15
West Midlands	8	8	25	16
Yorkshire and Humberside	31	28	33	28
South East			18	14

⁴ In Cohort 2 Central Beds / Luton became Central Beds / Luton / Hertfordshire

South East London			14	30
Total	183 (100%)	144 (79%)	228 (100%)	176 (77%)

3.3 Age profile of respondents

Although the programme was intended to attract candidates with relevant experience (summarised below in Table 4) a significant proportion of the candidates in Cohort 1 were under 30 years of age. At T1 the respondents were reasonably representative of the cohort with 73 per cent being 30 years or under, and 46 per cent of respondents being 25 or under. There was a higher proportion in the under 25-year age group of Cohort 1 amongst respondents (46 per cent: 35 per cent) and a lower response rate amongst the 41–45 age group. Otherwise the respondents matched the age profile of the whole cohort.

Table 4 Age profile of respondents

	Under 25	26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51+	No response / unknown	Total
Cohort 1	65 (46%)	39 (27%)	20 (14%)	9 (6%)	5 (3%)	5 (3%)	1 (1%)	-	144
Whole cohort	[36%]	[27%]	[14%]	[8%]	[11%]	[3%]	[1%]	-	[184]
Cohort 2	42 (24%)	62 (35%)	19 (10%)	15 (8%)	20 (11%)	12 (9%)	4 (2%)	2 (1%)	176
Whole cohort	[8%]	[46%]	[15%]	[9%]	[8%]	[6%]	[5%]	[3%]	[228]

The profile of those responding in the second cohort was that of an older group than the first cohort. In Cohort 1 46 per cent of respondents were under 25 years of age and this fell to 24 per cent in the second cohort. While there was little difference in the proportions of those in their thirties (20 and 18 per cent respectively) Cohort 2 had far more in the over-40 age group (7 per cent and 22 per cent respectively). There was more discrepancy between respondents and whole cohort in Cohort 2. Once again a higher

proportion of the under-25 age group responded, a lower proportion of the 26- to 35-year-olds, and a slightly higher proportion of the 41–50 age group.

The ratio of female to male completing the first questionnaire in Cohort 1 was one to five (Table 5).

Table 5 Gender profile of respondents

	Female	Male	Not clear	Total
Cohort 1	120 (83%)	23 (16%)	1 (1%)	144
Whole cohort	[83%]	[17%]	-	[184]
Cohort 2	162 (92%)	14 (8%)	-	176
Whole cohort	[89%]	[11%]		[228]

Both cohorts had far more females trainees than male. Cohort 1 contained a slightly higher proportion of females than in social work workforce as a whole while there was an even higher proportion of females in Cohort 2⁵. Over four-fifths of Cohort 1 respondents were female (83 per cent) and it was even higher (92 per cent) for those in Cohort 2. The respondent profile matched the profile of Cohort 1 exactly; in Cohort 2 it was close but a very slightly lower proportion of females / higher proportion of males responded.

3.4 Educational qualifications

All candidates had to have at least a first- or upper second-class honours degree to apply for the programme. Fifteen per cent of Cohort 1 respondents (n = 21) had a first class degree with all the others having gained an upper second (Table 6).

⁵ Seventy-eight per cent of those on the register are women compared with 22 per cent men. (General Social Care Council (GSCC), 2012)

Table 6 Classification of respondents' first degrees

	First class	Upper second class	Total
Cohort 1	21 (15%)	123 (85%)	144
Whole cohort	[15%]	[85%]	[184]
Cohort 2	34 (19%)	142 (81%)	176
Whole cohort	[19%]	[81%]	[228]

In Cohort 1, 15 per cent held a first-class degree and this rose to 19 per cent in Cohort 2. The profile of respondents in terms of the classification of their first degrees in both cohorts reflected the proportions across the whole cohorts.

Fifty-eight per cent [n = 83] of respondents had a first degree⁶ that could be classed as having some relevance for social work training⁷. Seventeen respondents to the questionnaire had a postgraduate degree: 16 had a master's degree and one had a doctorate. Nine of the postgraduate degrees could be considered to have some relevance for social work. Eight of these nine candidates did not have a relevant first degree, which meant that overall 64 per cent [n = 91] of trainees had previous qualifications relevant to social work. Thirteen per cent of respondents had a professional qualification, most commonly in teaching or youth and community work (Table 7).

⁶ Nine respondents had two 'first' degrees and in the case of four of these both degrees were relevant.

⁷ This included youth and early years studies, education, sociology, criminology and psychology.

Table 7 Relevant academic qualifications

	First degree		Post-grad. degree			Total respondents in cohort
	Relevant	Not relevant	Relevant	Not relevant	No post-grad. degree	
Cohort 1	83 (58%)	61 (42%)	9 (6%)	7 (5%)	128 (89%)	144
Cohort 2	120 (68%)	56 (32%)	58 (33%)	11 (6%)	107 (61%)	176

A higher proportion of respondents had a degree that could be classed as having some relevance for social work training at Cohort 2 than at Cohort 1 (68 per cent to 58 per cent). Cohort 2 contained a higher proportion of respondents with a post-graduate degree (39 per cent compared with 11 per cent) and most of these degrees were relevant to social work. Twenty-nine per cent of Cohort 2 respondents had a professional qualification.

3.5 Employment background

Candidates were required to have relevant experience with children and young people. In many cases this was through employment but it could also have been acquired through voluntary work or other activity. Of the 144 respondents 118 were employed in a relevant post when they applied for a place on Step Up and two were volunteering in a relevant field. At the time of application the majority were employed in the public (66 per cent) or voluntary (19 per cent) sectors. Details of their previous employment / volunteering and length of relevant experience are contained in Tables 8 and 9 respectively. (Table 8a compares the proportion of Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 in the various categories.)

Table 8 Previous experience

Support work – children	Support work – adults	Teaching	Teaching assistance (or similar)
38	9	9	21
Residential – children	Youth worker	Connexions	Community work
3	10	4	3
Youth Offending Team	Training – adults	Other professional – relevant	Other – relevant
1	4	2	14
Other professional – not relevant	Other – not relevant	Post graduate study	Volunteering
1	22	1	2

Table 8a Previous experience – Cohort 1 (C1) and Cohort 2 (C2) compared

Support work – children		Support work – adults		Teaching		Teaching assistance (or similar)	
C1	C2	C1	C2	C1	C2	C1	C2
26%	38%	6%	-	6%	6%	15%	15%
Residential – children		Youth worker		Connexions		Community work	
C1	C2	C1	C2	C1	C2	C1	C2
2%	3%	7%	12%	3%	3%	2%	7%

YOT		Training – adults		Other professional – relevant		Other – relevant	
C1	C2	C1	C2	C1	C2	C1	C2
1%	7%	3%	1%	1%	3%	10%	1%
Other professional – not relevant		Other – not relevant		Post graduate study		Volunteering	
C1	C2	C1	C2	C1	C2	C1	C2
1%	-	15%	-	1%	-	1%	5%

Table 9 Extent of relevant experience of respondents

	10+ years paid relevant employment or mixed relevant employment and voluntary work	5–9 years relevant paid employment or mixed relevant employment and voluntary work	1–4 years relevant paid employment or mixed relevant employment and voluntary work
	n = 26	n = 39	n = 56
	OR	OR	OR
	10 + years volunteering	5–9 years voluntary work	1–4 years voluntary work
	n = 1	n = 2	n = 13
Cohort 1 respondents	<i>19% of respondents had this level of experience</i>	<i>29% of respondents had this level of experience</i>	<i>48% of respondents had this level of experience</i>
Cohort 2 respondents	<i>29% of respondents had this level of experience</i>	<i>40% of respondents had this level of experience</i>	<i>25% of respondents had this level of experience</i>
** It was not possible to define experience for 4% of Cohort 1 respondents and 6% of Cohort 2 respondents.			

3.6 Consideration of social work as a career

Respondents were asked to say if they had previously considered a career in social work. Although the majority of the 144 respondents – 126 / 88 per cent – said that they had considered this very few would probably have pursued what well might have been a ‘passing notion’. In light of the comments that accompanied their responses it is safe to assume the overwhelming majority of this group would not have followed a career in social work without SUSW. Most (113 of the 126) identified at least one barrier to entering the profession. The overwhelming majority referred to a financial barrier, particularly where they were supporting families and / or where they were already repaying a student loan. However, this was only occasionally mentioned as the sole factor. The question of finance was usually paired with other factors. There were those who had been deterred by the negative perception of social workers amongst the public and by an absence of information on routes into social work for ‘outsiders’.

Eighteen respondents (12 per cent) had never previously considered a career in social work and were attracted by the opportunity to study for a professional and academic qualification while being paid and where they were able to build on past experience. One of these summarised the experience described by others:

It hadn't really occurred to me that I could be a social worker. I saw adverts and I thought I'd look in to how someone becomes a social worker. This route appealed to me above usual routes as I learn by doing and this was a practical course, it also was really beneficial that I could get paid to do it and have the course paid for.

Ninety-two per cent of Cohort 2 said they had considered a career as a social worker but as with Cohort 1 it would be unreliable to interpret this as a firm intention. Their reasons given for not taking this further are identical to those of Cohort 2.

4. Recruitment: awareness, application, assessment and allocation processes

4.1 Awareness of the programme

Respondents were asked to say how they had become aware of the Step Up to Social Work programme and their replies are summarised in Table 8. Nearly a third of Cohort 1 respondents had either received an email alert from CWDC as a result of registering for information during the *Be the Difference* campaign or seeing it on CWDC's website. One fifth had been told about it by a family member or by an acquaintance and another fifth had seen it advertised elsewhere.

Table 10 Awareness of Step Up

How respondents became aware	Number	
	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
CWDC's website or email	51 (35%)	30 (17%)
Word of mouth ⁸	28 (20%)	50 (28%)
Newspaper article / advert / local radio ⁹	28 (20%)	17 (9.5%)
Local authority webpage / email	12 (8%)	17 (9.5%)
Direct alert by local authority	-	19 (11%)
Careers events	6 (4%)	-
General internet search	13 (9%)	35 (20%)
Other	4 (3%)	5 (3%)
No information	2 (1%)	3 (2%)
Total	144 (100%)	176 (100%)

⁸ Many of the Cohort 1 respondents mentioned this came from family and friends, while more of those in Cohort 2 mentioned local authority colleagues or managers.

⁹ No national advertising took place during the recruitment of Cohort 2.

The absence of a national recruitment campaign to recruit Cohort 2, combined with local authorities' significantly greater involvement at this stage than was the case for Cohort 1 may explain why local authority websites, alerts and individual contact appeared to play a more significant role in raising the awareness of potential applicants.

The questionnaire asked respondents to reflect on their experience of the application process. Nearly two-thirds indicated that they were positive or reasonably positive about the application process:

The initial application form was clear and well designed. I found it straightforward to complete all the parts of the form. The final three questions which required a more extended answer were very helpful in terms of clarifying whether I was suited to the role, both in terms of the skill set and qualities necessary, and in terms of if I actually wanted to apply for the role given what it would entail.

Though daunting at first, I found the mini essay style questions an excellent way to showcase my skills and suitability for the programme rather than just having to fill out a personal statement.

Despite the reasonably positive responses a third – 32 per cent – expressed how constrained they had felt by the word limit and formatting:

The application form was quite simple, although it was difficult to articulate much in such a small space. But it was refreshingly short compared to others I've filled in. Information (about things like word limits on the form) could have been more clearly explained. Also, the form went out of format at certain points which was frustrating because you worry about what that will look like when it's received by the assessors.

Many of the comments indicated higher satisfaction with the application form than with other aspects. There was underlying irritation in relation to contact with the recruitment agency supporting the process. Most dissatisfaction focused on the lack of clarity around timescales and the absence of information on when they would know if they were to be invited to attend an assessment centre or have a final decision. Given that the majority were in employment they had to balance a potential change of direction with responsibilities. It was also suggested by many respondents that the names of referees should be requested and references obtained at this stage to avoid some of the long delays that occurred later.

Overall, 68 per cent of Cohort 2 respondents were positive about the application process. Feedback was generally favourable about the application form, specifically in allowing applicants to reflect on their skills, knowledge and experience. It was remembered as a very long document but the majority thought that was appropriate. While some found the online document worked well and was easy to complete and submit, others had

experienced considerable problems. These included the form not being user friendly and the 'save' feature failing to work. These experiences led to requests for a downloadable form that could be submitted electronically. There were also enough comments to suggest that more information about the structure and contents of the course was needed at this point, alongside access to an advice centre able to provide timely and reliable advice. Despite the relatively high satisfaction level it does mean that just under a third of respondents, whom it has to be remembered came through this successfully, expressed negative or mixed views about the form and attendant processes. For the most part this was determined by the extent to which the problems identified above, which irritated many others, had impacted on individuals

4.2 Experience of the assessment process

Regionally based assessment centres were organised by PENNA in cohort one and then by the regional partnerships themselves in cohort two. The day's programme consisted of group and written exercises, a simulated activity and interviews by the regional partnership and HEI staff. Respondents were divided on their experiences of the assessment process. Although only one reply contained completely negative comments – 72 (54 per cent) were positive and 71 (45 per cent) were mixed – but many did add that they looked back through the prism of having been successful. The explanations provided on how the day would run were appreciated, although this did seem to vary from centre to centre, as was the mix of exercises and interviews. The process was generally welcomed as an attempt to apply rigour and fairness to the process. Many respondents had been interviewed for courses or posts before and found this to be a far more intensive process. They thought that this was as it should be in view of the demands made on professional social workers:

It was really intense! I was so nervous and found it challenging but I thought it was a fair assessment because there were limited places and you had to ensure that the right people got offered a place. I felt really proud of getting a place after such a rigorous process, and had increased confidence in my ability to do the job.

I found that the assessment process was very intense however upon reflection I believe that it covered all aspects – group work telephone conversation and paperwork. This meant that you were assessed in a holistic way which covered all the elements required.

Candidates had been told that there was nothing they could do to prepare for the assessment centres in advance. A significant minority – approximately one in four – disagreed. They thought that some of the questions and exercises, specifically the one involving role play, required preparation and had assumed a knowledge of social work that they should not have been expected to have.

The sharpest criticisms were reserved for the group exercise *and* the lack of differentiation between the content of the two interviews, with half of respondents mentioning one or both of these. The group exercise involved service users and was frequently referred to as ‘patronising and pointless’ – or by similar descriptions – by over a third of respondents, particularly where the service users were not children, but teenagers and young adults and even more so when the service users were adults:

I found the group exercise a bit ‘false’ and felt that it was just people trying to speak the most / loudest, smaller numbers in the group would have given a better insight into personality, or something with a more specific focus, the topic seemed a bit simplistic.

I personally didn't feel that the group exercise was the best format to demonstrate how well you interact with others as the actual exercise was far removed from the type of scenarios that you would be dealing with either with other professionals or service users in practice.

There was widespread confusion about the need for two interviews. While it was appreciated that the local authorities and universities may be looking for different skills and testing different responses, the questions appeared too similar and candidates said that they had no alternative but to repeat their answers. Of more concern were the repeated references to what was interpreted as the rudeness of some individuals from both the universities and recruitment agency.

A higher proportion of Cohort 2 respondents were unreservedly positive (75 per cent) about the assessment centres than those from Cohort 1. The processes that had been used were seen to be rigorous and well designed. The criticism of the exercises and tasks that were so evident in the feedback from Cohort 1 respondents had almost disappeared. Most respondents thought they had been given the opportunity to display their strengths and abilities. Any criticisms focused on the organisation of the day, both in terms of the information sent in advance and the amount of time spent sitting around in those centres that were thought to lack pace. Between a quarter and a third of respondents from the East, NW Midlands and WLA were critical of one or both aspects.

4.3 Views on the allocation process

Overall, four out of five (79 per cent) respondents had been allocated a place in their preferred regional partnership and 65 per cent were placed in their preferred authority within the partnership. So it is not surprising that nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) of respondents were positive about their allocation and a further 16 per cent said they were reasonably happy. When they had not been placed exactly where they wanted to be their satisfaction was directly related to how their authority had explained the positive aspects and helped them to address logistic and travel issues. Most of the remaining ten per cent

were extremely disappointed at failing to get a place in their chosen regional partnership and, for some, it meant an unanticipated house move or a long journey to work.

Given that the organisation of the application and assessment process was significantly different for Cohort 2 than that used to recruit Cohort 1 this question was not asked of Cohort 2 trainees.

5. Support for trainees from regional partnerships

5.1 Trainees' overall satisfaction with support from regional partnership

At T2 just over half of respondents were satisfied with the support they were receiving from their regional partnerships, but by T3 this had fallen to just over a third. The proportion of trainees that were not satisfied also fell from one in five to one in ten, far more returning a 'mixed' reply at T3 than had done previously. The satisfaction level rose between T3 and T4, but did not reach the level achieved at T2. The rise resulted from a slight reduction in the proportion returning a mixed response and a continued low percentage recording complete dissatisfaction (Table 11).

Table 11 Overall satisfaction with support from regional partnerships at T2, T3 and T4

Satisfied?	N at T2	N at T2 Cohort 2	N at T3	N at T4
Yes	69 (57%)	119 (66%)	38 (36%)	57 (48%)
No	26 (21%)	11 (6%)	10 (9%)	11 (9%)
Yes and No	24 (20%)	50 (28%)	51 (48%)	51 (43%)
Minimal contact	3 (2%)	-	-	-
No response	-	-	8 (7%)	-
Total	122	180	107	119

The number of trainees in each regional partnership varied from 6 to 39 and this variation should be borne in mind when considering the number of responses that could be expected from each partnership. There were nevertheless discernible differences in the levels of satisfaction between regional partnerships. At T2 all 15 respondents in the East were satisfied with the support they had received, as were two-thirds of those in Yorkshire and Humberside, Greater Manchester and West Midlands, and half of those in

the East Midlands.¹⁰ The lowest level of satisfaction was amongst respondents in LTP, Central Beds and Luton, and West London.

¹⁰ There must be some caution exercised around the East Midland response given the relatively low response rate from trainees in that partnership.

Table 12 Satisfaction with support from regional partnerships – breakdown

	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4
Regional partnership	Yes	No	Yes and No	Minimal or no contact	No response	Total
East	15 →13→18	0→0→0	0 →1→3	0→0→0	0→0→0	15 → 16→21
Y and H	15 → 3→8	3 → 2→0	3 → 9→11	2 → 1→0	0 → 2→0	23 → 17→19
East Midlands	6 → 5→8	2 → 0→0	5 → 6→3	0 → 0→0	2 → 2→0	13 → 13→11
Greater Manchester	8 → 2→2	2 → 0→1	1 → 2→7	0 →1→0	0 → 0→0	11 → 5→10
LTP	10 → 6→7	9 → 1→3	4 → 11→13	1 → 1→0	1 → 1→0	24 → 20→23
West Midlands	5 → 3→5	2 → 1→1	0 → 2→2	0 → 0→0	0 → 0→0	7 → 6→8
WLA	9 → 2→8	5 → 6→6	9 → 17→9	0 → 0→0	0 → 0→0	23 → 25→23
Central Beds /Luton	1 → 2→1	3 → 0→0	2 → 3→3	0 → 0→0	0 → 0→0	6 → 5→4
	69 → 38→57	26 →10→11	24 → 51→51	3 → 3→0	0 →5→0	122 → 107→119

	57% → 35% → 48%	21% → 9% → 9%	20% → 48% → 43%	2% → 3% → 0%	0% → 5% → 0%	
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By T3 and T4 the East was alone in maintaining such a high level of satisfaction, although in the East Midlands the shift at T3 was to a mixed response rather than to a negative and returned to the T2 level by T4. Yorkshire and Humberside's response rate dropped by a third, again with a noticeable shift from 'positive' to 'mixed', which was sustained at T4. In Manchester, where again there were far fewer trainees responding at T3 than at T2, the numbers were too small to determine any shift but at T4 two-thirds reported 'mixed' satisfaction (Table 12).

Central Beds / Luton had been one partnership with a relatively low level of satisfaction at T2. Given how few trainees were based in that partnership it is difficult to comment on any change, but at T3 and T4 no one expressed complete dissatisfaction. This leaves the LTP and West London Partnerships. In LTP, where there was a slightly lower response rate at T3, while the number saying they were satisfied fell, far more striking was the drop in the number expressing dissatisfaction (9 to 1) with a marked shift to the 'mixed' reply and that pattern was retained at T4. In West London, although the number of respondents actually rose slightly at T3, the number who said they were satisfied fell sharply, with a significant shift to the 'mixed' response. Although the T2 level of satisfaction was restored by T4 the number dissatisfied – around a quarter – remained steady throughout. The comments that accompanied these choices make it evident that a shift to a 'mixed' responses often disguised greater dissatisfaction than might be assumed from taking the choice of 'mixed' on face value.

Nevertheless, by the end of the course, 48 per cent of respondents were recording complete satisfaction with the regional partnerships. The comments that were provided alongside these responses indicated that there were many trainees who perceived their regional partnership to be proactive and positive in communicating with them. Where this was the case trainees were usually more satisfied. They were certainly most likely to feel supported where there was an identified contact(s) that they had found to be approachable if they had any questions or concerns regarding any part of the programme. Conversely, a higher level of dissatisfaction was linked to trainees feeling they were being treated as 'students' rather than emerging professionals, where their opinions were ignored and / or where they had been excluded from discussions.

5.2 Trainee satisfaction with regional partnerships in the early months (T2)

At T2 the satisfaction which trainees recorded with their regional partnerships was strongly related to their views on the adequacy of their induction and how well they had been welcomed into the local workforce and workplace, and supported to undertake a role that was not only new to them but also to their employers. It was also linked to the communication they received from the partnerships which had clarified what they would be doing both in the first months of training and later. Where it was high respondents commented on the quality of communication regarding timetables and other

arrangements; they had a clear understanding of the regional partnership's expectations and who was responsible for what element of Step Up within the partnership. Those who felt supported by their regional partnership commented upon the responsiveness to their questions and queries. Conversely those who commented upon not receiving prompt and timely responses were left feeling frustrated, stressed and anxious when answers were not forthcoming and irritation was beginning to emerge where partnerships dismissed or minimised these concerns.

Respondents were aware that not all those on the Step Up programme enjoyed the same terms and conditions but concern and frustration were evident when the terms and conditions of contracts varied between authorities in the same partnership. The inconsistency in the payment of travel expenses in one regional partnership and the issue of annual leave in another were highlighted as particular examples of this. There was a concern that some students within the same partnerships were not always receiving mileage payments to and from university / placement whilst others were and there were differences reported over annual leave entitlement. In a number of areas bursary or other payments had been delayed and resulted in many feeling let down by their regional partnership:

I am pleased with my placement, however I am not pleased with the support gained for pay. We have not been paid on time as agreed with the local authority and are not getting regular fuel repayments. These things need constant following up (by the regional partnership) to push the local authority to uphold their side of the contract.

5.3 Trainee satisfaction with regional partnerships at T3 and T4

As at T2, when partnerships were seen to be in control of events and to be willing to find solutions to difficulties trainees viewed them positively. Although by T4 nearly half the respondents reported being satisfied with their partnership not only did the proportions differ considerably between partnerships but respondents provided far fewer comments to explain their selection. Those who were dissatisfied to any extent were far more likely to provide an explanation than were their satisfied counterparts. Nevertheless, it was evident that satisfaction levels continued to be high where partnerships responded swiftly to queries, where support was available and accessible and, not surprisingly, if the outcome was positive. The East partnership was one of those that continued to be commended for the provision of quality support, for the swift payment of expenses and a general level of efficiency specifically around communications with the trainees. The forum meeting for student representatives in the East was highlighted as a good mechanism for keeping students up to date and it was noted that their views were listened to and acted upon. Similarly the support received from the Learner Guides in Central Beds and Luton was valued very highly. The Yorkshire and Humberside partnership responded to a collective concern presented to them by the Step Up students

by organising a two-day home study allowance in order to enable the students to spend dedicated time on their portfolios to meet their submission deadlines. This action was viewed positively and was cited by about a quarter of respondents as an example of how trainees felt well supported.

By interrogating trainees' comments it was possible to determine the cluster of reasons why so many returned a 'mixed' response. A mixed response did not necessarily mean that they did not feel they had been listened to and in some cases changes had been made as a direct result of their feedback. The 'mixed' response could reflect a minor irritation or it could disguise a significant level of dissatisfaction on the same level as those reporting unqualified dissatisfaction. By T4 a recurring theme was disappointment that training was driven by the universities rather than the regional partnerships as anticipated. Other responses indicated that they had little contact with or awareness of their partnership and identified far more strongly with the authority in which they were placed. This was particularly evident in replies from those based in the Greater Manchester and Yorkshire and Humber partnerships.

Not surprisingly, trainees were less content if partnerships were seen either to ignore or to be incapable of resolving these problems. This was evident in the comments of trainees in regional partnerships where satisfaction levels were lowest. In one partnership nearly all the 'mixed' and 'dissatisfied' responses referred to the quality of the communication between the partnership and the trainees. Although there were references to the partnership trying to meet the needs of the trainees and provide high quality training, while stressing that there was access to good pastoral support, respondents thought that local authorities and possibly the HEI were making demands that carried greater weight and compromised the partnership's ability to always fulfil its responsibilities to trainees. In their feedback, trainees consistently referred to their anxiety as a result of delayed, confusing and, in their view unprofessional, responses to important and ongoing queries. Some of the feedback suggested that increasing face-to-face contact between the trainees and those running the partnership would have helped to rebuild the relationship. Others referred to partnerships engaging when there was a high-profile visitor or a media opportunity but otherwise sidelining trainees. By T4 a small number of trainees did acknowledge that communication had improved slightly and that some issues had been resolved. However, the majority of responses continued to report instances where it had been difficult to work with the partnership and how the support on offer remained limited. As a result the high level of dissatisfaction, disappointment and even anger continued to be evident amongst the trainees within this partnership over the way they had been treated:

There were a number of issues which arose during this period where I do not feel we were given an appropriate response. For example, we had concerns about (explains concerns about absence of funding to bridge end of training and employment) When we tried to voice these concerns – which I feel were

legitimate concerns as we could have essentially been without any payment for a number of months – we were told we were being unprofessional and we were not given any answers. I do not feel this matter was appropriately addressed and we were not treated as professionals. There also appeared to be an element of ‘passing the buck’ about who had responsibility.¹¹

Our voice was rarely listened to and when it was it was only to be told we were being ‘unprofessional’. To be patronised constantly and treated as though we were children was, quite frankly, insulting. Many of us have been at top levels in our former professions, have had to represent organisations in a professional manner so to receive comments that we are ‘unprofessional’ has been shocking, especially when we have gone through the proper channels when we have felt there have been points to be made. My suggestion for the treatment of future cohorts would be to remember that many of the students bring a wealth of professional and life experience and to be treated as such would be far more productive.

5.4 Overview

A feature that emerged at all stages and across all partnerships was a tendency for respondents to consider the relationship with, and awareness of, the role and contribution of regional partnerships more positively when the local authority where they were based was the lead authority. At all stages and even when respondents were otherwise critical, trainees recognised that this was a new training route and, in some cases the relationships between authorities in partnerships were still being developed.

At T2 – for Cohort 2 – two-thirds (66 per cent) of the 180 respondents who responded were satisfied with their regional partnership compared with 57 per cent of Cohort 1 respondents at the same time. The comments, unlike those made by respondents in Cohort 1, failed to add much detail about how the partnerships had or had not supported them. Many trainees did not expect support beyond ensuring bursaries and expenses were paid, and even some of those who said they were satisfied were unsure of the role of the regional partnerships. These tended to be the trainees who saw their locus of engagement as lying somewhere between their local authority and a university.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that there were more comments about the three regional partnerships that were new to Step Up than about the other seven that had been involved in Cohort 1. There were more administrative issues reported that needed to be resolved in those partnerships, similar to the type encountered so often by Cohort 1 respondents.

¹¹ It is fair to point out that this matter was eventually resolved in trainees’ favour but it had caused considerable concern and tension for trainees.

6. Trainees' satisfaction with support from their local authority

6. 1 Trainees' overall satisfaction with support from their local authority

At all three time periods (T2, T3 and T4) there was a higher level of satisfaction with the local authority in which trainees were based than with their regional partnership, although the extent did decline over the period (see Table 14). At T2 in 29 of the 42 authorities all the respondents were satisfied with the support they had received and in all the other cases it was a minority of respondents who expressed dissatisfaction. By T3 and T4 the number of authorities where all respondents were satisfied was 14 authorities and 15 authorities respectively; by T4 the level of dissatisfaction had fallen from 12 per cent to 2 per cent, with an attendant rise in the numbers saying they held 'mixed' views.

Table 13 Overall satisfaction with support from local authorities at T2, T3 and T4

Satisfied?	N at T2	N at T2 Cohort 2	N at T3	N at T4
Yes	95 (78%)	130 (72%)	76 (71%)	80 (67%)
No	15 (12%)	10 (6%)	3 (3%)	2 (2%)
Yes and No	12 (10%)	40 (22%)	22 (21%)	37 (31%)
No response	-	-	6 (5%)	-
Total	122 / 100%	180 / 100%	107 / 100%	119 / 100%

Table 14 Satisfaction with support from local authorities – breakdown

	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4
Regional partnership	Yes	No	Yes and No	No response	Total
East	15 →13→14	0→0→0	0 →2→7	0→0→0	15 → 16→21
Y and H	17 →11→12	3 → 0→0	3 → 6 →7	0 → 2→0	23 → 17→19
East Midlands	11→ 9 → 8	1 → 0→1	1 → 3 → 2	2 → 2→0	13 → 13→11
Greater Manchester	8 → 2 → 7	2 → 0→ 0	1 → 2→3	0 → 0→0	11 → 5→10
LTP	17 → 15 → 17	4 → 1→1	3 → 2→ 5	1 → 1→0	24 → 20→23
West Midlands	5 → 4 → 6	2 → 0→2	0 → 2→2	0 → 0→0	7 → 6→8
WLA	20 → 20 → 13	1 → 1→ 0	2 → 3→ 10	0 → 0→	23 → 25→23
Central Beds /Luton	2 → 2→3	2 → 1→0	2 → 2→1	0 → 0→0	6 → 5→4
	95 → 76 →80	15 →3→2	12 → 22→37	1 →6→0	122 → 107→119

	78% → 71% → 67%	12% → 3% → 2%	10% → 21% → 31%	0% → 5% → 0%	
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6.2 Trainee satisfaction with their local authority in the early months (T2)

At T2 over three-quarters of respondents said they were satisfied with the local authority where they were based. The very positive views of the respondents on most of the local authorities contrasted with mixed responses to some of the partnerships of which the authorities were a part (see Table 5).

Most comments about authorities at T2 linked to the respondents' placement experiences. The majority of these were very positive and related to the attention that had been given to identifying appropriate placements and the quality of support provided:

[xx] has provided me with excellent placements which were in place and ready for me, even when a last minute change had to be made. I have been made to feel welcome and I feel I am supported and listened to.

Local authorities were also commended for the wide variety of support on offer to the students, and a significant number of comments were made about the various different ways in which they had been made to feel like 'part of the team' that can bring with it access to a wide range of contacts, resources and the scope to develop very useful practice-based links:

[xx] has been the most supportive authority – far more supportive than I ever thought they would be. From speaking to other students, I definitely feel that this is the best authority to be with! We have monthly support groups, all of our practice educators are experienced and supportive, as is everyone who is part of the step up programme ... I have regular supervision, which is essential, and there are definite lines of communication which are open should I have any problems or issues.

The additional opportunities that some local authorities provided to work alongside social workers, through shadowing exercises, co-working or by providing access to shared training events, were seen as making an invaluable contribution to their academic work and in gaining an understanding of good practice. A number of local authorities in the LTP partnership were specifically commended for providing students with the opportunity to attend weekly, monthly or termly support meetings that were seen as being helpful in keeping the students informed about events within the local area.

There were respondents who were generally satisfied but who still expressed concern at the low level of awareness of the programme across their authorities. Inconsistencies in the quality and engagement of the teams and practice educators were sometimes attributed to their lack of awareness of the nature of the programme and it was seen to be the role of the local authority, supported by the partnership, to have addressed this:

Our practice educators generally seem to know very little about the portfolio that we are meant to produce and so have been struggling to direct us in this regard. Meeting with other students in the authority has also highlighted that all our practice educators are unsure how much they are being paid and when they will receive payment. Although not really anything to do with us it is unsettling knowing there seems to be no commitment to them.

Many of the more negative comments at T2 focused on issues that were in most (but not all) instances the responsibility of the regional partnership rather than the local authorities, such as the payment of bursaries and expenses, as well as entitlement to annual and study leave. When respondents had not been able to get a response to these issues from partnerships it did impact on their view of the local authorities, especially if there was the perception that officials at both levels were distancing themselves, in contrast to the 'open door' invitation made initially. Perhaps not surprisingly there were a few comments that reflected specific issues around performance or personal circumstances, which gave rise to a significant level of dissatisfaction.

6.3 Trainee satisfaction with their local authority at T3 and T4

The positive responses to their local authority continued through to T3 and T4, and the main focus continued to be on their placements, strongly associated with efficient arrangements for placements in appropriate and well-matched settings. Trainees appreciated the consideration that many of those in local authorities had given to ensure placements were near to the homes of the trainees, particularly as many had to use their evenings to study.

Local authorities were commended by many respondents for their strong and consistent support and encouragement. They were also praised for making trainees aware of training opportunities, impending organisational change and employment opportunities post qualification. The role of the practice educator / practice guide / supervisor was key and it appeared that simply having someone to contact and talk to made a great difference to the experience of

many trainees. However, by T3 there was an emerging concern about the late arrangement of placements. Although only a small number of trainees raised the issue for those that did it caused significant anxiety. It was a particular issue in a small number of local authorities – one in each of five regional partnerships.

By T4 reporting such concerns had declined as the uncertainties around securing employment came to the fore for many. Although most trainees had not been guaranteed employment on qualification a few felt let down, and in some cases ‘abandoned’, by their local authority when it came to securing or preparing for employment. In some areas financial pressures and the demand for experience meant that fewer newly qualified social workers were being employed. Trainees highlighted the additional pressure and time that job applications were taking at a stressful time. Even when job opportunities existed there were complaints about the processes that were put in place, including delays (of up to one month) in sharing the outcomes of interviews. Trainees’ comments highlighted the additional frustration and anxiety that dealing with the various recruitment processes presented. One respondent reported having to work part time in retail in order to make ends meet as a result of the delays in recruitment processes.

6.4 Overview

Overall there was a higher level of satisfaction with local authorities than with regional partnerships which, in part, may be explained by the greater contact that trainees had with their employing authorities than with the partnership in which they were based. While strong and regular general support communication by local authorities elicited a great deal of praise, where it was limited and infrequent it was the main cause of dissatisfaction. This was especially evident where key personnel had left without trainees being informed. The delayed payment of bursaries was another irritant, but as explained earlier in the report the main responsibility for this lay with the regional partnerships. Given the importance of the bursary to trainees to allow them to pay essential bills, any delay was a source of anxiety, as was any perceived delay or ambivalence over decisions on whether or not to employ them on qualification.

At T2 Cohort 2 respondents expressed a slightly lower level of satisfaction with their local authorities than had Cohort 1 respondents at the same time – 72 per cent compared with 78 per cent – but, unlike Cohort 1 responses, there were more ‘mixed’ responses than negative ones. Satisfaction was strongly

related to how placements had been arranged and progressing, but as with regional partnerships the way concerns were dealt with and the quality of information provided were also significant determinants of satisfaction. The highest levels of satisfaction with local authorities were found in Yorkshire and Humberside, LTP and East Midlands with the lowest emerging in the WLA partnership.

7. Trainees' satisfaction with support from the universities

7.1 Trainees' overall satisfaction with support from the two accrediting universities

Trainees were asked to record how satisfied they were with the support they received from the university where they were registered. At T2 a third of respondents were satisfied, a third dissatisfied and the rest either had mixed feelings or considered that they had not had enough contact to express an opinion.¹² By T 3 and T4 the limited contact category had disappeared. Approximately a third continued to be satisfied while the proportion that was dissatisfied halved at Round 3 (36 per cent to 18 per cent) and then rose to 26 per cent at T4. As with other aspects the proportion of respondents returning a 'mixed response' rose considerably from 17 per cent to 46 per cent at T3, falling only slightly to 43 per cent at T4 (Table 6). But the overall figures disguise significant differences in trainees' satisfaction between the two universities.

Table 15 Satisfaction with support from accrediting university

Satisfied	T2	Cohort 2 T2	T3	T4
Yes	42 / 35%	100 / 55%	34 / 32%	37 / 31%
No	44 / 36%	12 / 7%	19 / 18%	31 / 26%
Yes and No	21 / 17%	68 / 38%	49 / 46%	51 / 43%
Limited contact	15 / 12%	-	-	-
No response	-	-	5 / 4%	-
Total	122 / 100%	180 / 100%	107 / 100%	119 / 100%

¹² All those saying they had limited or no contact with their university were in regional partnerships where another training provider was delivering the course.

7.2 Trainees' satisfaction with the accrediting universities where registered

There was considerable variation in the satisfaction with the two universities across the regional partnerships (see Table 16). At T2 half of the respondents registered with Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) were satisfied with the contact at this six-month point compared with just one in five of those registered with the University of Salford. By T3 the proportion satisfied with MMU dipped to just over a third, returning to the T2 level by T4. The proportion satisfied with Salford rose slightly at T3, although still only to one in four of all respondents, but by T4 the proportion had fallen to its lowest point at just one in eight.

There was a rise in the proportion returning a mixed response about their satisfaction with the university where they were registered between T2 and T3, and this trend continued into T4 where a third of MMU registrants and half of Salford's said this was the case. Of more concern was the proportion expressing unqualified dissatisfaction with Salford University. At T2 over half of those registered with Salford University said they were totally dissatisfied with the contact compared with only one in six of those registered with MMU. The proportion dissatisfied with MMU stayed at that level throughout the study; and while it fell to one in five for Salford at T3 it rose to just under a third of respondents expressing unqualified dissatisfaction by T4 (see Table 17).

Throughout the three rounds of questionnaires (T2 – T4) respondents were more likely to be satisfied with the support they received when the university where they were registered was also delivering the course. This is a new route and there were many aspects, particularly during the initial months, that still had to be ironed out. It was bound to be easier for students to try to get answers when they were in direct contact with the awarding universities through lectures and meetings (see Tables 17 and 18).

Positive responses were linked with good programme organisation and lecturers that were interesting, knowledgeable and enthusiastic. Both the regional partnerships where MMU delivered the training directly (East and East Midlands) were geographically distant from Manchester. Much of the course was taught using online lectures and other digital training materials. MMU set up a help desk to address trainees' initial concerns over communication and lack of clarity around processes and provided phone tutorials that respondents found very helpful, especially in relation to their assignment plans and dissertation proposals.

Table 16 Satisfaction with support from universities where registered – breakdown

	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4
Regional partnership	Yes	No	Yes andNo	Limited contact	No response	Total
East (MMU – delivering)	14 → 8→16	0→ 0→0	1 → 8→5	0→ 0→0	0→ 0→ 0	15 → 16→21
Y and H (Salford – delivering)	8 → 2→3	9 → 4→2	6 → 11→14	0→ 0→0	0→ 0→ 0	23 → 17→19
East Midlands (MMU – delivering)	5 → 6→6	3 → 0→0	4 → 6→5	0→ 0→0	1 → 1→ 0	13 → 13→11
Greater Manchester (Salford – delivering)	5 → 2→0	3 → 0→4	3 → 3→6	0→ 0→0	0 → 0→ 0	11 → 5→10
LTP (MMU – not delivering)	5 → 4→5	6 → 7→9	5 → 7→9	2 → 0→0	6 → 2→ 0	24 → 20→23
West Midlands (MMU – not delivering)	5 → 2→3	1 → 1→1	0 → 3→4	1 → 0→0	0→ 0→0	7 → 6→8
WLA	0 → 10→ 4	17 → 5 →13	3 → 8 →6	1 → 0→0	2 → 2 → 0	23 → 25→23

(Salford – not delivering)						
Central Beds /Luton (Salford – not delivering)	0 → 0→0	5 → 2→2	0 → 3→2	0→ 0→0	1 → 0 → 0	6 → 5→4
	42 → 34→37	44 → 19→31	21 → 49→51	5 → 0→0	10 → 5 →0	122 → 107 →119
	34%	36%	17%	4%	8%	
	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	
	32%	18%	46%	0%	4%	
	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	
	31%	26%	43%	0%	0%	

Table 17 Satisfaction with support from Manchester Metropolitan University by delivery – breakdown

	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4	T2 →T3→T4
University and relationship with trainees	Yes	No	Yes and No	Limited contact¹³	No response	Total
MMU delivering						
East (MMU – delivering)	14 → 8→16	0→ 0→0	1 → 8→5	0→ 0→0	0→ 0→ 0	15 → 16→21
East Midland (MMU – delivering)	5 → 6→6	3 → 0→0	4 → 6→5	0→ 0→0	1 → 1→ 0	13 → 13→11
	19 →14 → 22	3 → 0 →0	5 → 14 →10	0 →0 →0	1 → 1 →0	28 → 29 →32
MMU not delivering						
LTP (MMU – not delivering)	5 → 4→5	6 → 7→9	5 → 7→9	2 → 0→0	6 → 2→ 0	24 → 20→23
West Midlands (MMU – not delivering)	5 → 2→3	1 → 1→1	0 → 3→4	1 → 0→0	0→ 0→0	7 → 6→8
	10 → 6 → 8	7 → 8 →10	5 → 8 →13	3 → 0 → 0	6 → 2 → 0	31 → 26 →31

¹³ All those saying they had limited or no contact with their universities were in regional partnerships where another training provider was delivering the course.

MMU overall	29 → 20 → 30	10 → 8 → 10	10 → 22 → 23	3 → 0 → 0	7 → 3 → 0	59 → 55 → 63

Table 18 Satisfaction with support from Salford University by delivery – breakdown

	T2 → T3 → T4	T2 → T3 → T4	T2 → T3 → T4			
University and relationship with trainees	Yes	No	Yes and No	Limited contact¹⁴	No response	Total
Salford delivering						
Y and H (Salford – delivering)	8 → 2 → 3	9 → 4 → 2	6 → 11 → 14	0 → 0 → 0	0 → 0 → 0	23 → 17 → 19
Greater Manchester (Salford – delivering)	5 → 2 → 0	3 → 0 → 4	3 → 3 → 6	0 → 0 → 0	0 → 0 → 0	11 → 5 → 10
	13 → 4 → 3	12 → 4 → 6	9 → 14 → 20	0 → 0 → 0	0 → 0 → 0	34 → 22 → 29
Salford not delivering						

¹⁴ All those saying they had limited or no contact with their universities were in regional partnerships where another training provider was delivering the course.

WLA (Salford – not delivering)	0 → 10 → 4	17 → 5 → 13	3 → 8 → 6	1 → 0 → 0	2 → 2 → 0	23 → 25 → 23
Central Beds /Luton (Salford – not delivering)	0 → 0 → 0	5 → 2 → 2	0 → 3 → 2	0 → 0 → 0	1 → 0 → 0	6 → 5 → 4
	0 → 10 → 4	22 → 7 → 15	3 → 11 → 8	1 → 0 → 0	3 → 2 → 0	29 → 30 → 27
Salford overall	13 → 14 → 7	34 → 11 → 21	12 → 25 → 28	1 → 0 → 0	3 → 2 → 0	63 → 52 → 56

Many respondents appreciated the effort made by tutors from both universities to maintain good links with them and respond to emails and telephone calls in a timely manner. By T3 some of the issues associated with implementation that had been a problem for respondents at T2 had been addressed and those who were registered with Salford University commented upon the changes that had been made to the second module handbook as a direct result of trainee feedback. However, some of the teething problems remained. Accessing university facilities such as libraries and printing services continued to limit Step Up trainees, and difficulties with IT systems – particularly ‘Elluminate’, the virtual classroom operated by Salford – presented ongoing frustrations for a large number of students, regardless of whether they were registered with Salford or MMU. On an 18-month intensive course not being able to access a library or a website is particularly annoying for trainees who are also ‘working’ for a significant part of the week. Even where universities attempted to overcome the problems and provided additional support many respondents’ concerns and frustrations persisted through to T4.

Just as satisfaction was strongly related to good communication between trainees and the universities, when respondents commented that support was not in place or that it had been difficult to access tutors they were more likely to say they were ‘dissatisfied’ or for it to be the issue that led them to record a ‘mixed’ response. Issues around communication frustrated many respondents. There were repeated reports of late or missing replies to emails, lectures being cancelled at the last minute and assignments being returned late. Many of the negative comments about both universities reflected the degree of disorganisation, confusion and vagueness that respondents had experienced and / or perceived not only, but more intensively, in the early months. This was attributed both to poor communication between the universities *and* regional partnerships, local authorities and other training providers, and to apparent delays in doing anything to address problems. The issues for those registered with MMU appeared, from the comments, to have been less acute than for those registered with Salford University. Possibly as result of the early difficulties a longer-term impact was to have been a continued distancing from, and lack of trust in, Salford University amongst a proportion of trainees that was not evident in the replies from those registered with MMU.

There were other comments that were obviously made with the intention of informing the development of the programme and which applied to both universities. While respondents were accepting of the fact that this was a new development in social work training and, as such, could be expected to require modifications and adjustments, some of the timescales and the

ordering of input were not judged to be supportive – these issues are dealt with in more detail below – and were aggravated by a lack of communication and some perceived tensions that existed between Salford University, in particular, and the employers and other trainers, typically illustrated by the following comment made by a trainee in the West London partnership:

There has been a complete lack of partnership working with Hertfordshire University. I don't feel that I belong to either of them and have found the set up frustrating and inadequate without a lead role from Salford.

7.3 Trainees' satisfaction with support from other delivery universities

At T2 respondents fell into two groups of similar size – 61 were in regional partnerships that had contracted with MMU or the University of Salford to deliver the course and 60 were in regional partnerships where other universities had been engaged to do this.¹⁵ Trainees in the four regional partnerships where other training providers delivered the course were asked to rate their satisfaction with them. Overall at T2 two-fifths were satisfied with the contact, a quarter was dissatisfied and the remainder – about one third of the 61 – had mixed views (Table 19). Any comparison with the responses at T3 is difficult because of the number of non-responses to this question (see Tables 19 and 20), but by T4 approximately one in five were unreservedly satisfied, a third were dissatisfied and half had mixed views.

Table 19 Satisfaction with the other delivery universities

Satisfied	T2	T3	T4
Yes	26 of 60	15 of 51	11 of 60
No	15 of 60	5 of 51	18 of 60
Yes and No	19 of 60	16 of 51	29 of 60

¹⁵ One respondent replied as if s/he was in a partnership where another trainer was delivering the course whereas it was one of the awarding universities – the response has been discounted from the analysis of the respondents.

No response	-	20	-
Not applicable	62	56	59
Total	122	107	119

At T2 there was a higher level of satisfaction amongst those from LTP and the West Midlands than from those based in West London and Central Beds / Luton, but it did fall sharply amongst the respondents from LTP partnership between T2 and T4.

Table 20 Satisfaction with support from other delivery universities – breakdown from T1, T2 and T3

Regional Partnership	Yes	No	Yes and No	No comment	Total
LTP	13→5→4	6→1→6	5→6→12	0→8→1	24→20→23
West Midlands	5→1→3	1→0→1	1→4→4	0→1→0	7→6→8
WLA	8→9→4	4→2→8	11→5→11	0→9→0	23→25→23
Central Beds / Luton	0→0→0	4→2→2	2→1→2	0→2→0	6→5→4
Total	26→15→11	15→5→17	19→16→29	0→20→0	60→56→58

Some of the concerns outlined above about the universities at which the respondents were registered were reflected in their views on the other training providers. They recognised that the uncertainties that surrounded aspects of the programme in the early months had created difficulties for the four delivery universities. There were communication problems that meant trainees had been confused about expectations around coursework and assessments. In some cases these were seen to be relatively minor, but not always. There was widespread acknowledgement of the fact that the delivery universities had usually attempted to find out information and resolve issues to the best of their abilities. In those instances many respondents thought Salford University had been too distant and, particularly in the early months, disorganised over providing course information to their training providers:

However it is clear that they (University of Hertfordshire) are greatly hampered by a lack of timely communication from Salford, who are quality assuring the scheme. This is extremely frustrating for students, as we are not being told until very close to the deadline what work is expected of us. Law lectures had to go ahead without knowledge of what would be in the exam, which was difficult for everyone, not least the lecturer. It is also difficult for tutors to give us guidance on how to complete essays as it is not clear what is being asked of us.

Again, given that this was a new route into social work, many issues needed to be resolved and it was only a minority of responses that emphasised the difficulties. However, trainees most concerned were concentrated in those regional partnerships where trainees felt too distanced from a university or where communication between the awarding universities and training providers was not working well enough. There were those who thought the lack of clarity that existed at various levels had sometimes been used to avoid and even shift responsibility between the parties. So there were comments that awarding and delivery institutions blamed each other without attempting to seek an early solution and that in some cases regional partnerships were not as active as they should have been in 'knocking heads together'.

The issue of communication remained throughout the study to various degrees, especially where trainees experienced difficulties in contacting and receiving a response from some lecturers. Some tutors in 'delivery' universities were identified as playing a valuable and significant role in creating a safe and creative space for trainees to learn and develop, especially those from the University of Hertfordshire. However, even there specific events had created concern. An example was where, on two occasions, lecturers left the university very suddenly without the trainees being made aware. In one case it was someone with whom they had had a great deal of contact and it irritated trainees and undermined their faith in training which constantly referenced professionalism and ethical behaviour.

Access to library facilities for those in the LTP and London partnerships was a particularly acute problem in the early days, but aspects continued. In some cases the complaints stretched to the adequacy of the library facilities but in other cases it was about the ability to gain access. The University of Hertfordshire used University of London premises to deliver the course to the West London trainees but the trainees were not able to use all the University of London libraries.¹⁶ Trainees thought that such a significant issue should

¹⁶ For example, LSE reserves the majority of new books to its course collection, which visitors are not allowed to access. Trainees in the Y and H partnership experienced a similar problem

have been resolved prior to the course commencing and if a resolution was not possible a University of London college should have been involved in the delivery.

Although there was a clear acknowledgement amongst trainees that the universities were all working within difficult and complex circumstances it was considered rather unhelpful to have the curriculum and assessments set by a university not delivering the course. This complexity continued to cause concern at all points with trainees not always being unclear about what they had been asked to do:

Having work marked by practice tutors who have not been to classes or seen what we have been taught has been very difficult, and the tutors are unwilling to give support when we are completing assignments. Class teachers find it difficult to give guidance on work which they have not set and will not mark. This has made me feel unsupported and caused anxiety when trying to complete work where I am unsure about what is being asked.

It became particularly acute for respondents based in Central Beds and Luton partnership where there were only six trainees. They felt that the delivery university had not made adequate provision for them and too often expected them to conform to the regulations applied to those on the other social work master's programme:

The university did not allocate a dissertation supervisor until 6 weeks before the dissertation was due in despite students requesting one many months before ... Moreover, although the dissertation supervisors tried their best, they did not have an interest in our chosen subjects which led them not to prioritise our work. Whilst at University between October to December, the University insisted we completed inappropriate unrelated assignments that were applicable to other Masters students not on the Step-Up course. When we questioned why we had to complete their assignments as well as our own we were told it could be used as evidence ... it turns out we could not use it as it was not applicable. When we challenged the university around this issue they stated we were being rude and childish. In fact, it was because it was very hard to do extra work that was not needed in an 18-month master's programme.

as Salford University used Leeds MU but trainees had 'guest' status and as result were only able to use some of the facilities.

It is, however, fair to point out that the trainees in this partnership indicated that the differentiation between the two programmes did improve over the course of the programme.

Respondents across all the four areas expressed concerns about the suitability and capability of some, but not all, of the lecturers. Trainees concerns were usually about lecturers who had been specifically recruited to respond to a late commission to work with a partnership on Step Up. Their comments referred to disorganisation, a superficial familiarity with the content of their lectures, a lack of commitment to the subject area and a loss of control over discussions. The result was that trainees then found it difficult to make the connection between the teaching and the assessments.

7.4 Overview

Respondents' feedback on the academic input was explored further at each time period and is reported in Section 8. The highest levels of satisfaction were recorded for those registered with Manchester Metropolitan University, particularly amongst those who were also taught by that university, even though in both cases this contained a large element of remote learning.

About a third of those providing an additional comment continued to refer to a lack of organisation, whether this was about the timetable, rooms or contact; lectures being cancelled, shortened or not rearranged; poor use of time during a university day; and the timing and sequencing of coursework in relation to academic input.

In nine of the ten regional partnerships engaged in Cohort 2 the trainees were receiving the academic input from the universities where they were registered, which was a much higher proportion than for Cohort 1. At T2 Cohort 2 respondents were more satisfied *overall* with their universities than those in Cohort 1: 56 per cent compared with 35 per cent. However at T2 far more of respondents returned a 'mixed' response and there were five regional partnerships with low levels of satisfaction. Much of the dissatisfaction expressed by those in Cohort 1 had been linked to poor communication across a partnership and two universities. So the disappearance of this triangulated relationship appeared to make a significant difference, particularly in WLA where the level of satisfaction amongst Cohort 1 respondents was extremely low but emerged as the highest from Cohort 2 respondents. Low levels of satisfaction were recorded amongst trainees in five regional partnerships: Yorkshire and Humberside; North West Midlands; South East; South East London and Central Bedfordshire, Luton, and Hertfordshire where

only one in four respondents expressed unqualified satisfaction. Overall satisfaction was linked to high quality teaching, clarity over requirements, assignments and deadlines and, once again, good communication. Conversely, dissatisfaction rose when these aspects were absent or when there was inconsistency; where teaching or reading lists were not linked to contemporary practice, and where there was too much disorganisation.

8. Preparation for practice

8.1 Preparation for practice: academic input

8.1.1 Trainees' overall satisfaction with academic input

At T2, T3 and T4 the respondents were asked to say whether or not they were satisfied with the academic input and the practice input they were receiving. However, as a result of an administrative error the web-based questionnaire and some of the electronic documents distributed did not contain this question. This was discovered as questionnaires were being returned and respondents were asked to provide a response. While the effect of the resulting methodological inconsistency is not insignificant the judgement was made that, on balance, it was better to do this than not attempt to capture trainees' views. But it is not surprising that the level of 'no responses' at T4 is much higher than at the T2 and T3. At T3 and T4 the questions explored specific areas in more detail as well as their views on the content, level and quality of the academic and placement elements.

At the T2 stage just over two-fifths were satisfied with the academic input, with one fifth saying they were dissatisfied and rest having mixed views. However, by T3 and T4 the level of satisfaction had fallen (Table 21). While the level of dissatisfaction did not shift to any great extent, except in WLA where it declined and LTP where it rose, there was a marked shift into the 'mixed' category (Table 22). It is worth noting that the rise in the numbers reporting unqualified satisfaction at T4 was largely due to the level of satisfaction amongst those in the East returning to the T2 level.

Table 21 Satisfaction with academic input – overall

Satisfaction	T2	T3	T4
Yes	53 (43%)	22 (21%)	37 (31%)
No	25 (21%)	20 (19%)	16 (13%)
Yes and No	44 (36%)	57 (53%)	46 (39%)
No comment	-	8 (7%)	20 (17%)
Total	122 (100%)	107 (100%)	119 (100%)

Table 22 Satisfaction with academic input – breakdown

Regional partnership	Yes			No			Yes and No			No comment			Total		
	T2	T3	T4	T2	T3	T4	T2	T3	T4	T2	T3	T4	T2	T3	T4
East (MMU – delivering)	10	2	9	1	3	3	4	9	7	-	2	2	15	16	21
Y and H (Salford – delivering)	10	2	4	5	5	4	8	10	9	-	-	2	23	17	19
East Midlands (MMU – delivering)	6	5	6	1	2	1	6	5	3	-	1	1	13	13	11
Greater Manchester (Salford – delivering)	5	2	3	2	0	1	4	1	5	-	2	1	11	5	10

LTP (MMU – not delivering)	11	2	3	2	8	4	11	10	11	-	-	5	24	20	23
West Midlands (MMU – not delivering)	6	2	4	0	0	0	1	4	2	-	-	2	7	6	8
WLA (Salford – not delivering)	5	8	7	9	1	2	9	14	9	-	2	5	23	25	23
Central Beds /Luton (Salford – not delivering)	0	1	1	5	1	1	1	3	0	-	-	2	6	5	4
Total	53	24	37	25	20	16	44	56	46	-	7	20	122	107	119

8.1.2 Trainees' satisfaction with academic input at T2

At T2 the highest level of satisfaction with the academic input on the course was amongst respondents in the West Midlands and the East regional partnerships with the lowest levels of satisfaction emerging amongst those respondents in the West London Alliance and Central Beds / Luton (Table 22). Salford was the awarding university for West London Alliance and Central Beds / Luton but the academic elements were delivered by other universities. A higher level of connection might be expected when the awarding university was directly involved in teaching the trainees and that this could link with a higher level of satisfaction. But this was not the case in relation to MMU where very few critical comments were received at T2 whether they taught the trainees or not.

Whatever the model experienced, those who were most satisfied judged the academic input to have been pitched at an appropriately high level for this type of intensive programme. There were positive comments about the quality of some lectures and e-learning and the materials provided, but few respondents provided additional comments to illustrate why they thought this was the case. However, in a few regional partnerships much of the training was delivered through an e-learning platform, and sharp differences were apparent in trainees' satisfaction with the approaches. While some respondents really liked the approach, the key to its success was judged to be the extent to which it was linked to face-to-face sessions, the stability and accessibility of the platform, and lecturers' ability to operate in this medium, as well as trainees' confidence in it and about it.

8.1.3 Trainees' satisfaction with academic input at T3

There was a minority of wholly positive comments at T3, with approximately one in six responding in that way. This reflects the shift to the mixed response evident in Table 22 above, but it was even more evident in the open text responses provided where at T3 only 12 unambiguously positive comments were recorded about the quality of the academic input and the teaching. There was considerable overlap between the mixed (56) and the negative responses (20), but a few issues distinguished the former. One was recognition that in some universities the teaching had improved as the course developed and there was greater clarity over expectations. This was particularly evident amongst the replies from those in WLA where trainees thought that it had taken time for the training provider, Hertfordshire University, to understand and balance Salford's requirements against their own. One particular lecturer was frequently identified as the person who had

managed to turn things around and if not achieve perfection at least bring about a significant improvement. Another was the mix of lecturers and teaching approaches used on courses. While some trainees commented on the lack of consistency that this introduced, others focused on the benefits of hearing different perspectives. And, even though not specifically a view on 'academic input', in many of the replies there was a 'sigh' of relief that library and passwords had been sorted out.

The input on law emerged as a popular and usually well-taught aspect of the course in all settings. Respondents were able to make the connection between its content and application to future practice. However, given its importance and the complexity of some of the issues covered, trainees would have liked to have had more time devoted to it. This contrasted with the feedback on the input on research methods, which mainly emerged as an unpopular and exceptionally demanding module, mainly because respondents did not think it had been well taught and had usually not been linked with practice or how they should approach their own research for their dissertations or extended essays. So, for example, the lecture that was delivered to the WLA trainees, where there were 62 PowerPoint slides on research, came in for a great deal of criticism. The minority who singled out research as well taught were nearly all taught directly by MMU.

The feedback provided by respondents presents a complex and rather patchy understanding of what delivery methods each university offered and it is therefore not possible to provide an assessment of the different approaches applied by each university (described briefly on p. 3) on the basis of the responses, although an attempt is made to speculate about some key determinants in Section 11. What is clear is that both Salford and MMU offered their students a blended approach of face-to-face lectures and e-learning. The e-learning elements of the Salford course were inserted to reduce travel for students who did not necessarily live close to the university; and online and telephone tutorials were delivered by MMU as their trainees were in two regions geographically distant from Manchester. There may have been many other ways in which online learning was used that trainees did not reference in their replies. Satisfaction with the telephone tutorials delivered by MMU was evident in the feedback; however, their timing was not always convenient. For example, holding a telephone tutorial midway through the working day whilst students were on their placements was not considered to be appropriate.

There was a significant level of dissatisfaction when any lecturers appeared very unprepared or relied too heavily on PowerPoint presentations. A

common response from across the partnerships was that there had so far been a failure to align the input with the practice experience or to acknowledge both the ability and limitations of the trainees:

At times we are treated like idiots ... the standard of the lectures is sometimes lower than GSCE level. For instance in a lecture on Human Rights every question that we asked was responded to with the words 'that's interesting' and no answer or explanation was given and the slides were so dumbed down that they didn't actually make any sense.

I think that sharing experiences with fellow students is a crucial aspect of learning, particularly in a 'helping' profession where we are dealing with stressful and upsetting situations on a daily basis. As students this is particularly important. However experienced we are we are not as resilient as we hopefully will be. We need to process our experiences. But this has not happened. Our action learning sets, for example, have been completely left to the wayside. It seems as if they have been seen by our lecturers as no more than a tick box exercise. Again it is reductive. The fact that processing and reflecting are not being treasured is a worrying sign when this is seen today as such a crucial aspect of social work. If we can't find time when we're students when will we find time? It's not good example setting!

The inclusion of practitioners into the lecture programme was usually considered to be an excellent and effective way of supplementing learning. Across the board respondents would have welcomed more such input.

The best teaching has been from those who are actually working in the field. This stuff is really excellent. For example on reflective practice, assessment and disability these people understand far better than teachers what current social work practice looks like. There should be much more of this.

A number of areas where improvement was needed were identified. The most frequently mentioned was the importance of preparing external lecturers for what had been taught and where trainees were on their training as well as how the Step Up programme was structured. But there were a small number of references to external speakers being treated unfairly and even with disrespect:

We have had service users come in who haven't been introduced properly and where the session has ended at the same time that they have left. I think that this is unfair on the students and the service

users. There should be time for us to process those experiences. There should be clear boundaries for the service users, so they know where they stand, where their involvement begins and ends.

8.1.4 Trainees' satisfaction with academic input at T4

At T4 the overlap and blend between the negative and the mixed response continued. They did, in fact, fall into two distinct groups: those that focused on organisational aspects and those that related to the academic input and requirements. About a third of those making comments in this section continued to refer at some point to a lack of organisation, whether this was about the timetable, rooms or contact; lectures being cancelled, shortened or not rearranged; poor use of time during a university day; and the timing and sequencing of coursework in relation to academic input. While these comments are not strictly about academic input it is difficult to imagine that their frequency and intensity did not cloud respondents' views of their universities.

At T4 the overall satisfaction level had risen from 22 per cent to 31 per cent, although, as noted above, the rise was chiefly as a result of the level in the East returning to its T2 level after dipping at T3. And the comments failed to provide very much information on why most of the trainees who returned a positive judgement did so, with the exception of those who were based in the East and East Midlands, both of which were taught directly by MMU. These were the only two areas where there were consistent references to high quality and relevant academic input. Not surprisingly there were comments about aspects that could be improved but the responses were not populated by the very negative feedback that ran through so many of the other responses.

By T4 the concerns around academic input focused on two areas – discrepancies between the trainees' expectations and their views on the reality of the level of academic content *and* the volume of work expected. There continued to be a few trainees who said they were overwhelmed by the amount that had to be fitted into an 18-month course but not many. Rather, the demand was for time to be found for practice related input by reducing the time devoted to areas such as research methodology and, in some cases, the degree of repetition that had been experienced and evidenced.

We could definitely use more teaching of greater depth on all of the key subjects e.g. attachment, domestic violence, disabilities, neglect and drugs and alcohol misuse rather than short sessions of two hours.

Some topics are clearly more significant than others however have been skimmed and it hasn't felt like masters level teaching. I also think topics should be revisited and discussed in greater detail rather than completing numerous presentations in groups and not really moving beyond that.

Respondents had expected the course to be demanding because they had to combine attendance at university and course work with working in their local authority. Trainees recognised that the programme was six months shorter than other master's routes into social work and that gaps needed to be filled by further reading on and around subjects. But there were very few comments about the work being too academically demanding or about the volume of work being difficult to manage alongside their placements. Instead, most of those flagging the volume of work as an issue suggested that restructuring the course, blocking teaching on specific days and not expecting trainees to come in for one lecture or group session, and taking steps to avoid cancellations and IT failures would free time for private study and relieve some of the pressure.

There were far more comments that expressed surprise and concern about the poor level of academic input and teaching than about any pressure arising from academic demands. In fact at T4, of the 189 comments that were coded¹⁷ 127 were negative.¹⁸ Criticism of the quality of teaching and the level at which the degree work was pitched not only continued to be voiced, but to emerge more frequently from trainees in certain partnerships. Concerns about quality ran through most of the replies from those based in LTP, where there were complaints about the superficiality of lectures and an apparent mismatch between their understanding (and occasionally experience) of what it meant to be on a master's course and the reality. While MMU validated this course the University of Chester provided the delivery.¹⁹ Similar concerns emerged from those in a number of other partnerships, particularly from those in Yorkshire and Humberside and WLA:

This has been a continual disappointment ... I never anticipated that a Masters could be so superficial, so devoid of academic input, and so ill-adept at covering the basics of social work theories and models. The lecturers appeared to be doing their jobs to a minimal degree and I found my learning to have been virtually non-existent in this regard.

¹⁷ From 119 respondents at T4 – many respondents made more than one comment.

¹⁸ 26 were unreservedly 'positive' and 36 were 'mixed'.

¹⁹ The arrangements changed completely for Cohort 2 of Step Up when LTP engaged John Moores University to validate and deliver the course.

They were supplemented by a widespread demand from those based in all the partnerships for lecturers to have had more recent practice experience: which was not always compensated for by using practitioner lecturers, as this depended on how well they had been briefed on what they should cover and on their ability to engage students:

It is all too evident that none of the lecturers have recent practical experience so how can we feel reassured that we are being prepared for practice?

This could not always be addressed by practitioners providing input on the courses. As discussed above this depended on how well they had been briefed on what they should cover and on their ability to engage students. But when this worked well it was appreciated:

There have been good moments. The best are when there is a combination of a practitioner and an academic who both know their stuff. That way we get a detailed theoretical / academic knowledge and a real idea of what that knowledge means in practice today.

As the course drew to an end even more of the criticisms focused on a perceived failure to provide the tools and skills they needed to practise, particularly around conducting assessments. It was not a reflection of any desire to see a reduction in the theoretical input but a plea for this to be linked more clearly to practice:

I think we need to see how we link the theory with an example of a core assessment or with the creation of a care plan – that would be far more beneficial. ... to look at how we can work in practice, what to do and what to say. Sometimes the theory gets in the way rather than supporting this.

[most of] the university material has provided little that could not be gleaned by a person with access to a broadsheet newspaper and Radio 4. It pains me to be so unrelentingly negative about this issue but when you hear managers of frontline social work teams state in the media that university courses are not preparing NQSWs for practice, this is exactly the kind of thing they mean. I have been hugely fortunate that my local authority has managed to arrange two statutory placements in frontline teams for me. I dread to think how I would have coped had I not had these and then been recruited into such a team after qualifying.

This, in turn, linked to wider demands for time for reflection and linkage between theory and practice:

If this were a theoretical programme in social work it would have been adequate. As a practice-led programme it wasn't. For me, the focus should have been on learning in the classroom how to be a practitioner from experience, not learning theories via PowerPoint presentations. I have not felt challenged academically.

According to Sibeon (1991) one of the recognized hallmarks of a profession is an underlying knowledge base, a body of specialist knowledge which acts as the basis of professional expertise. About one in eight respondents indicated that they had struggled to uncover the theory that underpinned social work. These trainees had expected to be given some 'tools' to do the job and to build up their professional expertise by combining a growing body of academic understanding as they increased their skills. But this had not happened. They wanted to be taught the skills they needed to do their job and they thought that without these their anxiety and stress would rise and they would emerge as qualified social workers without a professional skill base:

I am beginning to think now that this has been a do-it-yourself course – you hear loads of theories, read lots of books and stitch something together. This is not what I thought it would be like.

A few responses contained references to conversations with students training to be social workers on other non-Step Up courses which led them to think that this was symptomatic of social work training rather than something that was exclusive to Step Up.

8.2 Preparation for practice: practice input

8.2.1 Trainees' overall satisfaction with practice input

At T2, T3 and T4 the trainees were asked to say how satisfied they were with the practice input they had experienced. At T2 the level of satisfaction with the practice element was much higher than that expressed in relation to the academic input. Just over three-quarters (76 per cent) were satisfied – compared with 43 per cent with the academic input – and 10 per cent were dissatisfied; 11 per cent had mixed opinions and the remaining few did not express an opinion. At T3, as with their responses to the academic input, there was a lower level of satisfaction than at T2 but again the level of dissatisfaction fell slightly and the 'mixed' and 'no response' groups increased.

By T4 the responses must be read in light of the error reported in Section 8.1.1 above. Bearing this in mind the level of unqualified satisfaction had risen slightly, as had the level of dissatisfaction while the ‘mixed’ responses fell considerably (Table 23).

Table 23 Satisfaction with practice input – overall

Satisfaction	T2	T3	T4
Yes	93 (76%)	66 (62%)	79 (66%)
No	12 (10%)	4 (3%)	8 (7%)
Yes and No	13 (11%)	22 (21%)	12(10%)
No response	4 (3%)	15 (14%)	20* (17%)
Total	122 (100%)	107 (100%)	119 (100%)

* See Section 8.1.1 for a possible explanation of the higher non-response rate to this question

At T2, in four areas – East Midlands, LTP, West Midlands and West London – more than four-fifths of trainees were satisfied with their preparation for practice and nowhere did this fall below two-thirds.

8.2.2 Trainees’ satisfaction with practice input at T2

At T2 most trainees had enjoyed their placements and felt well supported by practitioners. The highest levels of satisfaction were evident where the practice educators understood the principles and structure of Step Up and where trainees had been able to discuss the theory underpinning an intervention or assessment:

Within this the practice supervisor asked me to think about different theories including attachment, behavioural, developmental and social. Within this I was asked to look at different situations and apply theory to this. As you can imagine the supervision was lengthy and we even got into a debate over the theories I had chosen. I think this is invaluable and it made me realise early on that everything that you undertake with service users can always be support and explained through theory. Also within supervision problems and issues that have occurred within my placement have been discussed and issues have been resolved.

For most of the trainees the placements provided them with an opportunity to understand the reality of social work practice and what it would mean for their

personal development. As at all stages a successful placement was considered to have included regular and thorough supervision sessions, well-planned and structured use of time and ample opportunities for their own assumptions and approaches to be challenged.

However, two recurring and related areas of concern emerged from the trainees across most partnerships at this early stage. One were the difficulties that arose when there was a general lack of awareness and understanding across authorities about the nature of Step Up and about the structure of the programme. Some trainees had found their work base was useful at the start of the course, but this had subsequently changed when their lack of experience meant they could not get too involved in cases and so the staff were unsure what to allow them to do:

The work base doesn't seem to have enough knowledge of their role as a 'host team' and the staff in them are also confused by what level students we are / what tasks we can undertake.

The social workers in my work base team have no idea why I am there and this has led to a variable experience. Individually they are happy for me to do home visits and attend meetings / conferences with them but the learning I have gained from these experiences has been a bit limited. I feel it would have been valuable for staff from the work bases to have had direct contact with staff from the university prior to the start of the course, or even to have that direct contact now so that they understand their role in supporting my learning going forward.

A further area of discontent for some has been caused by the apparent lack of consideration and acknowledgement of previous experience. Again, given the principles of the Step Up programme, previous experience of working with children, young people and their families was an essential requirement. However, some respondents have noted that they feel that their previous experience had been ignored when it came to deciding what trainees could do whilst on placements.

8.2.3 Trainees' satisfaction with practice input at T3

At T3 the majority of respondents, whether or not they reported overall satisfaction, commented on how much they were enjoying their placements and how they were providing an effective way of understanding social work. Most continued to comment on the value they placed on the practical experience they were gaining and the high quality support provided by practice educators and other professionals they encountered. In these cases

the experience allowed them to develop their skills as apprentice practitioners and some explained that they were beginning to investigate and understand how theory and knowledge were related.

The quality of supervision emerged even more strongly at T3 as a critical factor in the level of satisfaction with placements. Those who reported satisfaction with their placements were more likely to comment that they received regular, developmental and instructional supervision. Without this support trainees were more likely to feel unprepared for practice and disappointed with their experience (see Manthorpe et al., forthcoming).

Table 24 Satisfaction with practice input– breakdown

Regional Partnership	Yes			No			Yes and No			No comment			Total		
	T2	T3	T4	T2	T3	T4	T2	T3	T4	T2	T3	T4	T2	T3	T4
East (MMU – delivering)	10	7	9	1	1	3	3	3	7	1	5	2	15	16	21
Y and H (Salford - delivering)	16	14	13	3	0	2	3	3	2	1	0	2	23	17	19
East Midlands (MMU - delivering)	11	8	8	1	0	0	1	2	2	0	3	1	13	13	11
Greater Manchester (Salford -	7	1	6	3	1	1	0	1	2	1	2	1	11	5	10

delivering)															
LTP (MMU – not delivering)	20	15	15	0	1	1	4	3	2	0	1	5	24	20	23
West Midlands (MMU – not delivering)	6	3	6	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	2	7	6	8
WLA (Salford – not delivering)	19	14	15	2	0	1	1	7	2	1	4	5	23	25	23
Central Beds /Luton (Salford – not delivering)	4	4	4	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	5	4
Total	93	66	76	12	4	8	13	22	17	4	15	20	122	107	119

However, all of those who highlighted limited access to support also acknowledged that this was due to the environment in which they were working. These trainees were likely to be very understanding if the team in which they were placed was exceptionally busy and their colleagues under a considerable amount of pressure and where, despite the best intention to provide sufficient support and supervision, the delivery of the service often took priority.

The difficulties that had emerged at T2, where staff in placements were not aware of the nature of, and requirements around, Step Up and where trainees thought their previous experience was undervalued, continued to be mentioned but not to the same extent. Some regional partnerships made sure that their trainees spent their first long placement in an adult service. This was viewed very positively although it was in these settings that staff seemed most unprepared for a Step Up trainee and had often expected to receive a student who was intending to work in adult services on graduation. A minority of trainees had been placed in a voluntary sector agency and this had usually worked very well, except for one trainee who thought the work she had been doing bore very little relation to her future employment and was fearful about the missed opportunities to gain, in her estimation, relevant experience.

8.2.4 Trainees' satisfaction with practice input at T4

The overall level of satisfaction with placements at T4 was slightly higher than at T3 and may have been higher if not for the level of 'no comment' as a result of the omitted and re-sent question. Compared with the comments about the academic input the enthusiasm that emerged around placements was overwhelming. Respondents were clear that good placements, and particularly a good final placement, were fundamental to any social work training and respondents expressed their gratitude to teams and to individuals, including those with whom they had been allowed to co-work cases. In some of the areas where the greatest concerns emerged over the academic input, such as LTP, Manchester and WLA, authorities were repeatedly congratulated for providing outstanding experiences:

The placements have been the most valuable element of the course. The practice input I obtained was excellent which more than made up for the academic side. I had two good quality placements in children's work and I was offered extensive support by my practice educator and managers.

This has been the only experience that has prepared me for social work.

The nature of the work of teams where trainees were based was frequently described by terms such as 'frantic' and 'manic'. There were far more comments about missed supervisions and a reluctance to bother supervisors or other colleagues because of the pressures already on them. These did correlate with trainees returning a 'mixed' response. The reasons why 14 per cent recorded a negative response were clear. In some cases they had been in placements where they had, in their view, been under-used and as a result they thought they would be at a disadvantage when it came to applying for a job. In other cases they had either failed to develop a constructive relationship with their supervisor or other key person or that person had left unexpectedly.

8.3 Integration of theory and practice

According to Bogo and Vayda (1998) and Boisen and Syers (2004), social work education assumes practice is closely linked to the use of theory yet struggles to establish how best to initiate students to do this.

Implicit in preparing students for service in the field is a process whereby the information, knowledge, and critical analytic base acquired by students in the academic part of professional education is translated into an ability to relate to persons seeking help and to arrive at professional decisions in a service context. (Bogo and Vayda, 1998, p. 8)

Practice informed by theory distinguishes professional social work from informal forms of helping. Theory expands the conceptualization of client problems, helps to organize large amounts of complex data, and provides direction for intervention (Berlin and Marsh, 1993; Beder, 2000). Though commonly accepted that theory plays a central role in competent practice, social work education programs have struggled to identify the means to assist students in linking theory taught in the classroom to practice in the field. The conundrum of how to ensure the student's ability to link theory with practice has been a consistent theme throughout the social work education literature.... (and) represents a major educational challenge not only for programs in this country, but also for those throughout the world (Skolnik, Wayne, and Raskin, 1999). Two of the most prevalent questions related to the integration of theory and practice concern where to locate the primary responsibility of integration in the curriculum and how to discern which strategies are most effective in enhancing students' abilities to integrate theory and practice. (Boisen and Syers, 2004, pp. 205–206)

Within social work, terms such as ‘applying theory to practice’ or ‘integrating theory and practice’ are commonly used but it is not always evident what is meant by them or how the process happens. Respondents were asked to reflect on the way in which theory and practice had or had not been aligned or linked. As Table 25 illustrates, at T2 the majority of respondents were positive about the way in which theory and practice had been brought together, but this declined over time.

Table 25 Views on integration of theory and practice

Views expressed	T2	T3	T4
Positive views	80 (65%)	35 (33%)	34 (28%)
Negative views	18 (15%)	19 (18%)	52 (44%)
Both positive and negative views	18 (15%)	37 (34%)	12 (10%)
No response	6 (5%)	16 (15%)	21 (18%)
Total	122	107 100%	119

There were no significant differences between the trainees’ responses in terms of the two lead universities or even the regional partnerships. Trainees usually attributed any success to the ability and interest of their supervisors and other colleagues in the placements:

It has been really informative seeing the theories applied in practice and also practising new skills and knowledge. I have seen and had experience of assessments and been able to see where the legislative and organisational requirements come in to the role and how they make it a challenge to carry out practice in a way that is conducive to anti-oppressive practice and my personal and professional values. I have really enjoyed engaging with service users and supporting them to achieve positive outcomes. I have seen the benefit of working in partnership and also making everyone aware of your roles and responsibilities at the beginning of any contact, particularly in the area of safeguarding.

At T3 and T4 respondents continued to report the importance of supervisors and practice educators. They were very positive about those who said they grounded their practice in a theoretical construct and who had encouraged them to explore the theories that related to and informed their practice:

I have had weekly supervision on all my placements and been able to reflect on practice experiences – anything from a two year old's temper tantrum to a case review of a family with additional needs – and make links with theory.

My practice educator (PE) has encouraged me to think critically about the limitations of theories and we have discussed the importance of social workers drawing on a range of theories and methods in practice. Where a particular theory has come up in supervision, for example humanistic principles, my PE has encouraged me to go away and plan how to use it in an initial meeting with a family. He has also suggested additional reading where, for example, I have questioned the impact of neglect on a child's development.

A lack of integration was often linked to the type of placement that trainees had experienced. So even in regional partnerships where there was a reasonably high level of satisfaction, individual trainees reported difficulties. A few of those who had placements in children's centres at T2 referred to the lack of emphasis on theory; this was attributed to the differences in working practices between children's centres and social care and to the fact that staff were not from a social work background so 'social work' supervision was not always provided. In some regional partnerships the first 'long' placement was in services used predominantly by adults and these experiences led many of these trainees at T3 to reflect on their experiences of how theory and practice had or had not been integrated. They usually reported an absence of any theoretical preparation for the adult setting in which they were placed. As a result they had felt unprepared for the lack of contact between the different services and in some cases the suspicions that had been encountered about children's services, alongside a basic lack of understanding and / or awareness about sharing information. While trainees were generally very positive about their experiences in adult settings, on placements they often referred to a failure of the academic input to offer a space to reflect on what they had learned and how it linked to the lives of children and young people:

As the majority of us are in adult settings, the luxury of applying taught modules to practice has not been possible and at times it has felt like we were completing two distinct and separate courses.

They were disappointed that there had been too many missed opportunities by universities, and even during the final placement, to link the work they would go on to do in children's services to the understanding they had gained about drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence and mental illness:

There has not been enough interest in my previous experience. I had loads of experiences that were relevant to this placement but have never really been asked about this. This is a waste of valuable experience – something I thought Step up was trying to harness. This is a very similar quote to one earlier

As noted earlier, practitioners had sometimes been invited into universities to help prepare trainees for working in another sector, and while the workshops or lectures were usually rated as excellent, they were also seen to be isolated add-ons that had not been linked with the rest of the academic input. A number of respondents suggested that there was a need for universities to select contributors carefully, concentrating on those who were able to explain and discuss theories, as well as challenge prejudices and assumptions.

The relationship between theory and practice in social work education and training has focused on the question of how students can integrate theory and practice and how the design of the academic and practice elements of courses can contribute to the integration. Given that there is no agreed definition of theory, and possibly little around practice, the relationship between the two has to be constructed at an individual level. It was evident that by T4 many trainees had reached this conclusion.

I think I would have benefited from co working more complex cases. During the 18 months I was moved from being within the Duty and Assessment team to the care management team, due to an assessor leaving on maternity leave. I found this difficult. Because my learning needs were in risk and child protection (CP), I wanted to go out on CP referrals on a regular basis to develop my analysis, risk and assessment skills and I had valued working with a highly experienced practitioner. The team I moved to was just as relevant but was managing long term cases where relationship has been built between service user and social worker, and my assessor was not as experienced as the other. So I think the linking of theory into practice was of a different quality and I had to take more responsibility. The second assessor has very little knowledge of Step Up, but she acknowledged and valued the previous experience I brought to the role as we got to know each other.

There were trainees who reflected on the difficulties they encountered in actually achieving integration of theory into their own practice. One of the examples was where anti-oppressive practice had been covered in detail. A trainee then had experience of social workers being faced with very difficult individuals and unpleasant situations where 'ideal' practice had not been

observed:

This is not a criticism, but an observation of the reality of practice. I feel that I am not constantly thinking of underlying theories, but on reflection I can see that I have used them as a base, sometimes without realising ... and at other times the 'moment' takes over.

Eraut (1995) demonstrates how student teachers face similar dilemmas. They too often lack the time to reflect because they need to react immediately. But trainees valued those instances where they had been encouraged to reflect and where it was implicit in the approach taken by their practice teachers and in their teams.

Theory is a way of explaining why people do what they do (see Beder, 2000). It encompasses the theory of social work and theories for social work (see Payne, 1991). It can be interpreted as a way of organising and making sense of concepts so as to be able to apply them to observations and practice, or it can be a specific such as cognitive and behavioural theories, aspects of which have a direct relevance for practice. According to Kadushin (1992), using theory in supervision to make knowledge understandable is the 'principal responsibility of the social work supervisor'. The overwhelming majority had experienced something like this in at least one placement (or part of), although only a few were able to say that it had been consistent throughout their training:

I have been very fortunate in being able to link theory with practice throughout the course. This has helped me not only to reflect on practice but to be able to identify further areas for development ... I have been able to talk about theory with colleagues whilst it is still fresh in my mind and that has enhanced my learning.

Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981), for example, showed that much of the theory taught in teacher education was 'washed out' during field experiences. Their research pointed to the importance of the school-based teacher educator in supporting the student in reconciling 'theory' with the specific problems he or she faced. This is the same for social work and focuses attention on an issue that was referred to earlier, which is the lack of understanding of the nature of Step Up by some staff in the local authorities, which was also identified as an impediment to the integration of theory and practice. Too many reports continued through to T4 of supervisors and practice educators not understanding what was being taught at university. Although an element of this was seen as almost inevitable, it was thought that greater transparency and advance planning would have countered this, at

least in part. But of even more significance to trainees was the tendency for some of those they came into contact with, including practice educators, to minimise the importance of theory in fast-moving, challenging work environments. Trainees accounted for this either in terms of the practitioners having forgotten the theory they had learned or that it failed to make sense to them or that they had absorbed it so deeply they could not distinguish it from their 'innate' knowledge. Thompson (2000) acknowledges that many practitioners reject theory and prefer to adopt what they see as a pragmatic or 'common sense' approach. This would fit with the suggestion made by some trainees to deploy off-site practice educators who had contemporary experience of both teaching on social work courses and of practice.

8.4 Overview

Overall, the level of satisfaction with the practice element was much higher than that expressed in relation to the academic input. The comments made in response to the levels of satisfaction with academic input have been mixed, and although there have been examples of satisfaction there are also a significant number of trainees who – despite acknowledging and appreciating their involvement in a new and innovative training route and despite the best efforts of the universities involved to meet the needs of the students – have expressed concern and anxiety at a number of elements of the course. This can be said for both MMU and the University of Salford, as well as of other universities involved in Step Up. However it is evident that the highest levels of satisfaction when quantitative and qualitative data are read together are amongst those taught directly by MMU. The next highest level of overall satisfaction is amongst those where MMU validated the training but where the University of Coventry delivered the training.

9. Preparation for specific aspects of social work

9.1 Feeling prepared for practice: T3 and T4

At T3 and T4 respondents were asked to say how well prepared they felt in relation to 13 key areas. These areas were agreed after consulting with staff on a number of 'non-Step Up' social work courses. It is worth remembering that at T3 they would have been responding when they were 12 months into the 18-month training programme and at T4 they were on the point of completing the course. They were asked to respond on a five-point Likert scale where 1 equated with not feeling prepared and 5 equated with extremely well prepared. It is appropriate to band these into three groups according to how well prepared trainees believed they were at the two points in time: well prepared (points 4 and 5); adequately prepared (point 3) and ill-prepared (points 1 and 2).²⁰ Table 26 summarises these responses.

When these figures are examined to see what proportion of trainees felt they were being at least adequately prepared – at the 12- and 18-month stage – it appears that the overwhelming majority felt that this was happening in all areas, with the exception of work with adults (Tables 27 and 28). By the end of the course the views on the extent to which they felt they had been adequately prepared had been sustained and even improved. So at T3 over 90 per cent of trainees said they felt at least adequately prepared in relation to five of the thirteen areas, by T4 the number in this category had risen to nine of the thirteen. Of the remaining four areas 80 per cent said they felt at least adequately prepared in relation to three of these. However, the proportion saying this was the case for working with adults was just under 60 per cent.

²⁰ <http://statisticscafe.blogspot.com/2011/05/how-to-use-likert-scale-in-statistical.html>

Table 26 Summary table of trainees' perceptions of preparation

AREA	Inadequate		Adequate		Well / very well		No response	
	T3	T4	T3	T4	T3	T4	T3	T4
Context of social work	7%	3%	24%	19%	67%	78%	2%	-
Social work values and ethics	4%	-	20%	23%	74%	77%	2%	-
Social work theory and methods	26%	7%	38%	34%	36%	60%	-	-
Application of social knowledge	21%	6%	36%	34%	41%	60%	2%	-
Social work with adults	41%	41%	40%	34%	17%	25%	2%	-
Social work with children and families	6%	1%	33%	12%	59%	87%	2%	-
Anti-oppressive practice	6%	2%	24%	18%	68%	80%	2%	-
Research methods and	25%	11%	30%	38%	43%	51%	2%	-

evaluation								
Social work roles and responsibilities	12%	2%	31%	21%	55%	67%	2%	-
Issues of power and discrimination	7%	-	22%	19%	71%	81%	-	-
Interpersonal communication	18%	3%	29%	22%	53%	75%	-	-
Human growth and development	15%	12%	32%	40%	52%	48%	1%	-
The legal system	18%	7%	45%	50%	36%	42%	1%	-

Table 27 Proportion feeling adequately prepared for aspects of social work at T3

Over 90 %	Over 80%	Over 70%	Under 60%
Social work values and ethics	Social work roles and responsibilities	Application of social knowledge	Social work with adults
Issues of power and discrimination	Human growth and development	Social work theory and methods	
Anti-oppressive practice	Interpersonal communication	Research methods and evaluation	
Social work with children and families	The legal system		
Context of social work			

Table 28 Proportion feeling adequately prepared for aspects of social work at T4

Over 90 %	Over 80%	Over 70%	Under 60%
Social work values and ethics	Social work roles and responsibilities		Social work with adults
Issues of power and discrimination	Human growth and development		
Anti-oppressive practice	Research methods and evaluation		
Social work with children and families			
Context of social work			
Social work theory and methods			
Application of social knowledge			
Interpersonal			

communication			
The legal system			

However, taking the responses in relation to feeling *very* or *well prepared* and grouping the areas into 70 per cent plus, between 60 and 69 per cent, between 50 and 59 per cent and under 50 per cent it is possible to identify where trainees were feeling most prepared. At T3 this was clearly in relation to social work values and ethics and issues of power and discrimination (over 70 per cent); these were followed by anti-oppressive practice and the context of social work (over 60 per cent). Over 50 per cent felt very well prepared or well prepared for work with children and families (59 per cent), on roles and responsibilities (55 per cent), on interpersonal communication (53 per cent), and on human growth and development (52 per cent), while under 50 per cent felt they were being well prepared on research methods and evaluation (43 per cent) and the application of knowledge (41 per cent). The areas where the fewest reported feeling well / very well prepared were social work theory and methods (36 per cent), the legal system (36 per cent), and in particularly low numbers, social work with adults (17 per cent)²¹.

As already noted, by the end of the course the extent to which they felt they had been adequately prepared had improved. So once again, taking the responses in relation to feeling *very well prepared* or *well prepared* and grouping the areas into 70 per cent, between 60 and 69 per cent, between 50 and 59 per cent and under 50 per cent it is possible to identify where trainees were feeling most prepared by the end of the training at T4. In addition to social work values and ethics *and* issues of power and discrimination, over 70 per cent now said they felt well prepared about the context of social work, social work with children and families, anti-oppressive practice and inter-professional communication. Sixty per cent or more felt well prepared / very well prepared on social work roles and responsibilities, the application of social work and social work theory and methods and over 50 per cent on research methods and evaluation. There were three areas where under half of respondents felt very well prepared or well prepared. These were human growth and development (48 per cent), the legal system (42 per cent) and, least of all, social work with adults (25 per cent). Respondents were asked to comment on their responses and these are summarised in Table 29.

²¹ These data are generally in line with the findings of Wilson and Kelly (2010) who evaluated student perceptions of the strengths and limitations of their education and training on the Bachelor of Social Work at Queen's University, Belfast .

Table 29 Commentary on responses concerning preparation for the 13 aspects

Context of social work	This had occurred mostly while trainees had been on placement and those who had not had a placement in a particular setting, such as in mental health, or contact with a client group, acknowledged that they felt there were gaps in their understanding of context.
Values and ethics	Most trainees felt well-prepared but said this was as a result of being able to consolidate and explore in more depth on their placements what had been superficial or ill-defined on their courses.
Social work theory and methods	Trainees wanted much more input on theory and methods and for this to be approached more rigorously and linked with interventions. Again many said they had gained a far deeper knowledge about theories while on their placements and where their practice educators and supervisors had been interested and knowledgeable.
Application of social knowledge	This was largely, and sometimes exclusively, said to have been achieved on placement.
Social work with adults	The academic input on adult social care in general was said to be limited although many trainees had a relevant placement and felt more informed. Overall the limited academic input was not viewed negatively as most wanted even more time to be devoted to issues concerning children and families. So they recognised the importance of input on mental health and alcohol / substance abuse, but most did not consider they needed to be prepared specifically for practice in those areas. Those who had placements in these areas commented on the understanding they had gained as a result and how this contributed to their readiness for practice in children's services where these issues were often present in families.
Social work with children and families	The respondents recognised how much they had learned and how much experience they still needed to gain. The academic and placement experiences were valued but they wanted more input on areas such as assessment and risk.
Anti-oppressive practice	Some trainees valued the academic input; others would have preferred more on how to address oppressive practice when it was encountered. But there was a consensus about the importance of placement experience in consolidating their understanding.
Research methods and evaluation	Some trainees considered they had been well-supported through this module, while others either thought it had been approached superficially or had not provided the level of support required to fulfil requirements around a

	dissertation or similar.
Social work roles and responsibilities	Comments were generally positive but heavily dependent on input during placement.
Issues of power and discrimination	Most trainees considered this to have been covered adequately, although there was a split between those who thought this was through the university input and those who thought it was through their placement experience. ²²
Interpersonal communication	Whilst the area has been touched upon in some lectures, the majority of learning in this area has come from the experiences gained whilst on placement.
Human growth and development	Some respondents felt that this was one of the stronger academic modules and that the experience gained on placement complemented the learning well, but the majority wanted to see more time allocated to the discussions around this area and some felt that the issues covered need to be explored in more depth.
The legal system	Some trainees considered themselves to be well prepared in this area, while others felt that the academic teaching could have been more effective. A considerable amount of independent study was required in this area to give them the confidence that they could contribute to legal proceedings.

²² There were a number of comments that referred to the majority of their cohort being 'white' and how case studies and examples used had too often been used in a surprisingly naïve way to create an 'us' and 'them' scenario. In some instances the examples were said to be drawn from another era and the concepts of 'race', 'ethnicity' and 'culture' had been used interchangeably. There were also observations on the failure to use the topic to develop skills in reflective practice.

9.2 Feeling prepared for practice: Variations across partnerships

It is interesting to examine the variation between trainees' responses according to the partnership in which they were located. When the responses for well prepared / very well prepared are explored there are some noteworthy variations which, once again, should be treated with caution given the different response rates between partnerships. At T3, responses from trainees in the East Midlands indicated that they were being prepared at a level above the 'programme average' in nine of the thirteen areas and replies from those in the East indicated that this was the case in five of the thirteen areas. In contrast, in four partnerships – Yorkshire and Humberside, Greater Manchester, Central Bedfordshire / Luton and WLA – trainees only recorded an above average score in two areas, and those from trainees in LTP in none of the areas. Similarly, the responses from trainees in WLA and West Midlands were below the 'averages' in five areas, in East in four areas, and in LTP and Central Beds in three areas. This indicates that the respondents in the East Midlands were feeling most prepared across all these areas at the 12-month point, followed by those in the East. However, the trainees in West Midlands, WLA and LTP were feeling far less prepared.

At T4, respondents were just about to enter into practice as qualified social workers. Respondents in the East returned above average scores in six of the thirteen areas and those from the East Midlands in five of them. There were no above average scores in any of the thirteen areas from respondents in Greater Manchester, LTP or Central Beds and Luton. Those in Greater Manchester also recorded below average scores in eleven of the thirteen areas, while those responding from WLA and Central Beds and Luton recorded below average scores in five areas and those in LTP in four areas. This continues to indicate that respondents in the East and East Midland partnerships were feeling most well prepared in relation to these thirteen areas. Those in Greater Manchester reported the lowest level of preparation, but there must also be some concern about the responses from WLA, Central Beds and Luton and LTP.

At T4 seven additional areas were explored. The overall proportions feeling they had been well prepared or very well prepared are recorded in Table 30.

Table 30 Overall proportions feeling well prepared or very well prepared at T4

Well or very well prepared to:	Average	Responses by regional partnership
Develop plans	65%	This proportion was consistent across most regional partnerships with a higher proportion in Yorkshire and Humberside and WLA.
Assess and manage risk	72%	This reflected the proportions in the East, Central Beds. and Yorkshire and Humberside. It was higher in East Midlands and WLA and lower in Greater Manchester, LTP and West Midlands.
Assess needs	78%	The proportion was higher in the East, East Midlands and West Midlands and considerably lower in Greater Manchester.
Reflect on practice	80%	The proportion was above this in Yorkshire and Humberside, Greater LTP and West Midlands, and much below in Greater Manchester.
Work effectively with individuals	78%	With one exception this proportion was reflected in all regional partnerships, but it was much lower in the West Midlands.
Work effectively with families	82%	Again, while this proportion was reflected or exceeded in seven regional partnerships it was much lower in the West Midlands.
Work effectively with groups	55%	The proportion saying they were well or very well prepared to work with groups was much lower than for families and individuals. It was slightly higher in Yorkshire and Humberside, East Midlands and LTP, and much lower in Greater Manchester and WLA.

The scores for all 20 areas are recorded in Tables 30 and 31 below. Although this is quite a crude measure given the replies are reasonably consistent, it does provide some interesting indicators as to how prepared the trainees considered they were to embark on their careers as qualified social workers. The majority of those emerging from the East and East Midlands partnerships considered that they were well prepared or very well prepared in most areas. In a further three areas – Central Beds / Luton, West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside – this was the case for at least fifteen of the twenty areas and in two regional partnerships areas – LTP and WLA – in fourteen of the twenty areas. However, it does show that the majority of those in the Greater

Manchester partnership only felt well / very well prepared in four of the twenty areas.

Respondents were also asked to say how well they thought they had been prepared overall to practise as a newly qualified social worker. Over a quarter – 27 per cent (n = 32) – said they believed they were *very* adequately prepared and a further 69 per cent (n = 82) thought they were adequately prepared. Every respondent based in East, Yorkshire and Humberside, East Midlands, LTP and West Midlands fell into one of these categories. This left just five respondents – 4 per cent – who considered their preparation to have been inadequate – two in both Greater Manchester and WLA and one in Central Beds and Luton partnership.

Table 31 Proportion saying well prepared / very well prepared across the regional partnerships (1)

	T3		T4	
Social work values and ethics	74%	At T3 the percentage was reflected across all partnerships except Greater Manchester and Yorkshire and Humberside where only half considered they were being well prepared.	77%	By T4 in East, Yorkshire and Humberside, East <i>and</i> West Midlands and Central Beds / Luton the proportion of respondents saying they were well prepared / very well prepared were at or above this average; but it fell below this in Greater Manchester, LTP and WLA.
Issues of power and discrimination	71%	At T3 the proportions were higher amongst those based in East, Yorkshire and Humberside and East Midlands; much lower in West London.	81%	At T4 the proportion in all partnerships was at this level or higher except in Greater Manchester and Central Beds / Luton.
Anti-oppressive practice	68%	At T3 consistent across most partnerships but higher in East and West Midlands and Central Beds / Luton.	81%	At T4 the proportion in all partnerships was at this level or higher except in Greater Manchester
Context of social work	67%	At T3 consistent across most partnerships but lower in the East.	78%	At T4 three-quarters or more of respondents in seven of the partnerships considered they were well prepared / very well prepared, but the proportion was far lower in Greater Manchester.
Social work with children and families	59%	At T3 More variation across partnerships with four in line with this, two above it – East and West Midlands – and two below	87%	At T4 the proportion saying they were well prepared / very well prepared was at this level or above in all partnerships, except for WLA and Central beds / Luton where it was

		– WLA and Central Beds / Luton.		slightly lower, and Greater Manchester where it was much lower.
Social work roles and responsibilities	55%	At T3 consistent across most partnerships but higher in Y and H and East Midlands and much lower in the East.	77%	At T4 in six of the eight regional partnerships the number of respondents feeling they were well prepared / very well prepared was at or above this average; the exceptions were Greater Manchester and WLA.
Interpersonal communication	53%	At T3 consistent across four partnerships, higher in East and East Midlands and lower in West Midlands and West London.	75%	At T4 this rose significantly. It was higher than the average in the East and East and West Midlands and lower in Y and H, Greater Manchester and LTP.
Human growth and development	52%	At T3 this average was reflected in Greater Manchester and West Midlands; higher in East and East Midlands and lower in West Midlands and WLA.	48%	At T4 the proportion fell. It was higher than average in the East and lower in Yorkshire and Humberside and WLA.
Research methods and evaluation	43%	At T3 this was higher in WLA and Central Beds / Luton and lower in East and West Midlands and LTP.	51%	At T4 the overall proportion was higher than at T3. It was above this average in the East and East Midlands and below in Greater Manchester, LTP and Central Beds / Luton.
Application of social knowledge	41%	At T3 this was consistent across four partnerships; higher in East Midlands and Greater Manchester and lower in LTP and Central Beds / Luton.	60%	At T4 the overall average rose. It was above the average in Y and H and the East Midlands and lower in the East, Greater Manchester and Central Beds / Luton.

Social work theory and methods	36%	At T3 this was consistent across four partnerships; higher in East Midlands, East and Greater Manchester and lower in WLA.	60%	At T4 the overall proportion rose and was significantly higher in the East and below the average in East Midlands, Greater Manchester and LTP.
The legal system	36%	At T3 this average held across five partnerships but fell below in three – East, West Midlands and Central Beds / Luton.	42%	At T4 the average rose only slightly. It was higher in the East and lower in Greater Manchester, West Midlands, WLA and Central Beds / Luton.
Social work with adults	17%	At T3 the proportions were slightly higher in the East and WLA and lower in East and West Midlands and LTP.	25%	At T4 the average rose but it remained very low. It was higher in the East, East Midlands and WLA and lower in Y and H, Greater Manchester, LTP and West Midlands.

Table 32 Proportion saying well prepared / very well prepared across the regional partnerships (2)

At least average and below average for:	Central Beds and Luton	East	East Midlands	LTP	Greater Manchester	West London Alliance	West Midlands	Yorkshire and Humberside
Social work values and ethics (av. = 77%)	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓	✓
Issues of power and discrimination (av. = 81%)	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Anti-oppressive practice (av. = 81%)	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Context of social work (av. = 78%)	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Social work with children	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓

and families (av. = 87%)								
Social work roles and responsibilities (av. = 77%)	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓
Interpersonal communication (av. = 75%)	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	x
Human growth and development (av. = 48%)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	x
Research methods and evaluation (av. = 51%)	x	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓
Application of social knowledge (av. = 60%)	x	x	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Social work theory and	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓	✓	✓

methods (av. = 60%)								
The legal system (av. = 42%)	x	✓	✓	✓	x	x	x	✓
Social work with adults (av. = 25%)	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	x	x
Develop plans (av. = 65%)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assess and manage risk (av. = 72%)	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	x	✓
Assess need (av. = 78%)	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Reflect on practice (av. = 80%)	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓
Work effectively with individuals	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓

(av. = 78%)								
Work effectively with families (av. = 82%)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓
Work effectively with groups (av. = 55%)	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	✓
No. of areas where graduates thought they were well prepared / very well prepared	15 / 20	19 / 20	19 / 20	14 / 20	4 / 20	14 / 20	15 / 20	17 / 20

10. Trainees' reflections at the end of the training

10.1 What they are doing

Respondents were asked to provide details of whether or not they had secured a post as a social worker. Of the 119 respondents, 109 had secured a post either in the local authority (n = 94 / 79 per cent) where they had been based or in another local authority in that partnership (n = 15 / 12 per cent). Two respondents had been offered posts as social workers by another authority or agency. This means that 93 per cent of respondents held posts as social workers by late spring 2012 (see Table 33). Overall of the 185 who embarked on Step Up 168 completed the course (91 per cent) and at this point it is known that 82 per cent are employed as social workers²³. This represents a very high conversion rate where the latest reliable figure puts the national figure at 54 per cent (see GSCC, 2010).

10.2 What went well?

Apart from at T1, trainees were asked to identify *up to* five things about the programme which, in their opinion, had gone well. At T2 and T3 two-thirds had mentioned their placements, and while just over two-fifths mentioned some element of the academic course at T2 this fell to one third at T3, although trainees referred to the success of particular modules and seminars and the support that they had been provided by individual academics. Peer support, outstanding practice educators and the input by visiting / invited professionals and experts were frequently identified at both T2 and T3.

By T4 over three-quarters of respondents mentioned their placements, many saying the experiences had provided valuable insights into practice and prepared them for their future careers as social workers. Just over a third mentioned something linked to their academic experience, especially the support that they had received from their dissertation tutors. Again, peer support and the lectures delivered by practitioners were identified as having gone well, but by this stage the focus was very much on placement and academic experiences.

²³ It is thought that this is higher than this figure as data have not been available for all those completing.

Table 33 Destinations after completion of Step Up to Social Work training

Regional partnership	Practice as a social worker in my local authority	Practice as a social worker in another authority in my regional partnerships	Practice as a social worker in another authority or agency	Follow another career	No information	Total of respondents
East	16	2	0	1	2	21
Y and H	15	3	1	0	0	19
East Midlands	7	3	1	0	0	11
Greater Manchester	7	2	0	1	0	10
LTP	20	3	0	0	0	23
West Midlands	5	2	0	0	1	8
WLA	22	0	0	0	1	23
Central Beds /Luton	2	0	0	0	2	4
Total	94 (79%)	15 (12%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	6 (5%)	119

10.3 What had not gone well?

Respondents were also asked to name *up to* five things about the programme which, in their opinion, had not gone well. At T2 and T3, two issues were each mentioned by just under two-fifths of respondents. These were the poor communication between all or some of the parties involved in Step Up *and* a lack of clarity that they had found over arrangements and processes. Just over a quarter were very unhappy about some aspect of the organisation of the course and just under a fifth were dissatisfied with the quality of the academic input and the support available to students, usually from the lead universities and occasionally from the regional partnership. Further areas were identified by a very small number of respondents dissatisfied with the time for reflection, the level of funding and the location of placements.

By T4 the issues around poor communication continued to be a problem but only for a small number of trainees, while the majority of respondents – just under 70 per cent – identified at least one issue relating to the delivery of the course that needed to improve. These included the timings of assignments and submission dates (especially towards the end of the course), the order in which some lectures had been delivered and the quality of the academic input. The submission of the dissertation or extended essay caused a particular strain. A minority referred to the level of work as overwhelming at this stage of the course and many called for greater consideration to be given to the deadline and pressures placed upon them at the end of the course.

10.4 Trainees' final reflections

Despite all the reservations expressed at each time period, when trainees were invited to contribute final comments the majority either exclusively or partly contained a statement of how much they had enjoyed the experience.

I have found the experience incredibly positive. It was made very clear from day one that the level of commitment would be massive – so no surprise there! The close links with our local authority have worked well, having a host team that linked with my final placement eased me in and prepared me more than a simple induction would have done ... Yes there were hiccoughs initially but nothing major.

I would not have been able to train as a social worker without this due to financial commitments. I am 50 this year and so proud to be joining the profession.

Step Up has been a fantastic, life changing experience

Many said how privileged they felt to have been accepted and often apologised for any negative comments they made. However, the comments from those in the Greater Manchester partnership contained far more negative comments than those from any other partnership and focused on some placements that were considered to be

inappropriate, as well as lack of support from the university and from some local authorities.

As might be expected, respondents' anxieties related to limited employment opportunities that were emerging at this round. Only one regional partnership – WLA – had guaranteed posts to those who successfully completed the course. Trainees had been required to sign an agreement at the beginning of the training to say they would accept a post or repay the salary they had been paid.²⁴ In other partnerships trainees were invited to apply for a post where there were vacancies. The uncertainty that this created began to emerge at T3 but was very evident by T4.

Despite the (dis)organisation of the course it was the only way for me to retrain as a social worker – both financially and time constraint-wise. My only concern is if the authority will be able to offer me a job.

I felt privileged to have been selected and I have worked incredibly hard to get to the end of the course. I gave up a good career to do this and although there was no guarantee of a job there was an unspoken expectation that we would all get work. This has not proved to be the case and it is stressful and demotivating. It will be a shocking waste of public money if we are not given the opportunity to show how good we are. If people don't find work they will drift off into other things and all that training will have been wasted.

Although at T1 88 per cent had said they had contemplated a career in social work it was evident from their responses that very few Cohort 1 trainees would have embarked on training if they had not gained a place on Step Up. A few trainees did wonder about the impact of Step Up on social work. They were in teams where they saw their qualified colleagues not having the time to deal with cases in any depth:

If a system is flawed in this way do individual workers have the power to change the system? While I understand the need for a quick and efficient solution, surely it would be better to change the system as a whole? The training we are receiving is not providing us with the requisite skills and / or knowledge to affect change.

There were, on balance, slightly more trainees who referred to the pressures involved in meeting the demands of an MA while on placement or in other settings. However, only three comments indicated that the workload had led them to contemplate leaving the course. While not excusing any deficits, far more comments linked the pressures to the uncertainties and disorganisation that accompanied a new course or to pressures in the field or to universities – all of which could be corrected. But there were also a minority who thought that by restructuring the course it could be done in a shorter time:

²⁴ As trainees became aware of this after they had accepted a place and made arrangements to start the training it is not clear that this would have been enforceable. It certainly elicited a number of negative reactions at every stage.

I believe the course could be done in an even shorter period of time – most of us have work and / or life experience. The work-based days are not necessary and should be excluded from the timetable.

It has been an amazing opportunity to retrain at speed and with financial support but there has been too much concentration on research methods and sociological theories at the expense of practical social work skills, knowledge and theory actually required to work in child protection teams. This has become evident in my final placement where I am expected to carry out interventions and direct work with families and I have to go away and read up in my spare time in addition to having to study. Time needs to be better spent, that is all.

Many trainees said how grateful they were for the financial support but there were those who did not think it would attract many career changers unless they had other means of support:

Having few responsibilities is important. The overall demographic of my year group was young, white, childless females. It does not feel like a fast-track career change into social work – with the size of the bursary it is more like a stepping-stone for recent graduates with some experience to gain a further academic qualification and to start a career.

Only a few of those who had secured a job were not sure they would stay longer than a few years:

I don't like some of the work. I enjoy the face-to-face work with children and families. But there is less of that and more of lengthy and restrictive forms. I think there isn't enough creative thinking and dialogue between professionals taking place in my local authority. It can sometimes feel like I am working in a call centre. As a result of these things and despite some of the more positive aspects of the experience, I don't see myself in child protection social work in two years.

While there were those who were anxious about securing a post there were many references to the joy of having qualified and enthusiasm for their future careers. It remains to be seen how many of Cohort 1 will be in practice in two, three or five years and it is to be hoped that future contacts with this cohort will reveal that information. For the present, formal and informal feedback from employers indicates that these now-qualified social workers are very well regarded and that they believe many future managers and professional leaders will emerge from this cohort.

A further questionnaire will be sent in June when the first year in practice will be completed. However as part of a programme of work on the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) a questionnaire was sent to participants in Cohort 1 in November 2012. The main focus was on their experiences of the introduction of ASYE but the opportunity was taken to ask them to reflect on how prepared they were then feeling in relation to the seven areas explored at T4 (recorded in Table 29). There was a

lower response rate than at T4 (n = 88; 56 per cent of those known to be in social work posts) and for this reason, as well as the fact that it was not promoted as part of the Step Up evaluation, the results must be treated with caution. However it is still interesting to examine the responses. Respondents continued to feel very well prepared – and as well prepared as at T4 – to reflect on practice; and there was an overall rise in the proportion feeling well prepared to work with individuals, families and groups. There was, however, a slight fall in the proportion feeling well prepared to develop plans and assess need and a considerable drop in the proportion feeling they had been well prepared to assess and manage risk. The fact that there is a drop in relation to the assessment and management of risk is probably not surprising as it must be one of the most difficult tasks to face any social worker, and one that requires experience and support. However, it is worth noting that the proportion feeling that they had been very well (27 of the 88 – 31 per cent) or adequately (55 of the 88 – 63%) prepared by Step Up has remained almost at the same high level as recorded at T4.

11. Overview

As acknowledged earlier in the report the evaluation has provided a very valuable opportunity to follow a group of trainees through their training to become social workers, and the study will be strengthened both by continuing to follow them through their early careers, and by following up those who have been in Cohort 2. As described in the opening sections, the main purpose of the evaluation at T1 was to focus on the process of implementation of Step Up, specifically the approaches used in the application, assessment and allocation processes. The challenge is now to respond to what has been learnt. The findings at T1 were considered when planning the second intake onto the Step Up programme. The findings from T3 and T4, as well as from the feedback received from Cohort 2, will inform the planning for the third cohort.

But as well as shaping the future of the Step Up to Social Work programme the evaluation has raised some very important questions about the shape of social work training while providing immensely useful data that will continue to be explored as time goes on. One of the key principles of Step Up was to move away from a divide between academic and practice domains to try to avoid the compartmentalisation that lay at the heart of criticism from employers that newly qualified social workers were unprepared for practice. However, the challenge to achieve a more integrated model appears to remain. There was clearly some concern about the academic input across a number of partnerships alongside a very mixed picture of how well trainees thought practice and theory had been integrated. While some were extremely pleased by the way in which their practice educators and other colleagues had supported their efforts to understand the theories they had been taught, others were left wondering if theory was a part of the practitioner's toolkit.

Despite some difficulties the importance students place on the practice element of the course has emerged in many studies. The practical aspects of all social work courses are intended to allow future practitioners integrate social work theory, values, skills and knowledge, and apply these to their direct work (see, for example, Bogo, 2005). Kanno and Koeske (2010) insist that the quality of field instruction is important for student satisfaction and sense of efficacy. Yet a review of the literature on the integration of theory and practice within the social work discipline uncovered studies where graduates of social work degree programmes felt that their class work had not adequately prepared them for real world practice (Clapton and Cree, 2004).

Research also indicates the importance of mediating theory and practice using high levels of supervision and mentorship in a supportive environment (Saravana et al., 2006). Developing the skills to be able to apply and integrate theory and practice is challenging and demanding. It is clear that trainees need a great deal of help in making links between their understanding of theoretical concepts and what this means for their practice. However, there have been many studies that have reported that social workers do not use research and theory to inform their practice (see Mullen et al., 2005; Preston-Shoot

and Agass, 1990):

Social workers have an ambivalent relationship with theory. Uncertain of its relevance, social workers lack an adequate theoretical and conceptual base for purposeful practice. They are often unable to articulate the skills and knowledge which guide their practice, or the specific forms of intervention or practice theory they are applying to their work ... Theorising is abandoned to academics (Preston-Shoot and Agass, 1990, p.5)

Social workers have also questioned the integrity of the link between theory and practice:

In practice, the apparent anti-intellectual stance of workers has often been the result of the reliance on ad-hoc theorizing by even the most experienced practitioners. Their actions are guided not so much by formal theory but by a form of intuitive reflection that generates a unique theory in action. (Martinez-Brawley and Mendez-Bonito, 1998, p. 197)²⁵

In a more recent study Gordon et al. (2009) did not find social workers used theory to guide their practice; instead 'their theorising' emerged from their practice, based on inductive rather than deductive analytical processes where they reject theory, preferring to adopt a 'common sense' approach.

While there is little consensus about the theories that practitioners should know (see Reamer, 1994), Hugman (1991) identifies the absence of 'a clearly demarcated scientific knowledge base' as a barrier to full professional status, relegating social work and nursing to the 'semi-professions' as defined by Etzioni (1969). It is this lack of certainty that led some respondents to question whether there was a solid theoretical underpinning to what they were doing. Scrine (1988 and 1989), drawing on her own and other evidence, recommended that academic teaching should 'substantiate and extend the students' placement learning while their practice should enable them to "try out" the theory which they have been taught.' Instead, she too found a divide between the two parts of social work education.

Step Up was an opportunity to bridge that divide. While it has been successful on a number of levels, not least in strengthening the links between HEIs and the field, on the basis of the experiences of those who were part of Cohort 1, as well as the emerging voice of those now forming Cohort 2, based on the trainees' feedback it would seem that there is much that still needs to be done. Despite good intentions the traditional view of both training and of placements had not changed enough to accommodate the very different Step Up vision where practice educators and supervisors were expected to be teachers and develop daily or weekly strategies to promote student reflection as a key part of their learning. This called for the development of a pedagogy for workplace learning that included greater recognition of prior experiences. The fact that the

²⁵ See also Pilalis, 1986; Siporin, 1978; Pemberton, 1981.

programme had to be implemented in less than a year is the major contributing factor to any failings encountered along the way to achieving of a truly new model of social work education and training to emerge.

Respondents expected the supervisory and educative processes would allow them to reflect on their own practice and its implications. While they did not expect all supervisors or practice educators to have an excellent understanding of a range of theories, there was an expectation that they would be able to help them dissect their experiences and construct them within some kind of theoretical frame. Although not desirable in reality, theory and practice are separated by the domains in which each is most valued. But the significance of the practice educator or equivalent should not be underestimated. S/he was an important variable and could be a key facilitator or obstacle to supporting learning. The Step Up model has at its core what Clapton and Cree (2004) envisaged as an essential component of training. That is a model that integrates theory and practice in ways that bring the field into the classroom as well as taking the classroom into the field. The role of the practice educator or equivalent is crucial in bringing about sustainable improvement in the quality of professional practice by supporting someone to commence on the journey 'from novice to expert' (see Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). But to do this they need appropriate knowledge and skills. The experiences of trainees in Cohort 1 indicate that more energy needs to be devoted to the selection, training and support of their practice educators. At the very least they need to be aware of the content, structure and orientation of the course and be experts in practice and its theoretical underpinning.

On the basis of the trainees' feedback it would seem that something altogether more radical is needed. Social work education and training, as in other professions, combine didactic instruction with experience. However, what has been learnt from their feedback suggests that the academic and, to a lesser degree, practical input has not always supported a process of complex learning. The good practice model of social work promoted by the Social Work Task Force (2009) and by Professor Munro (2011) is based on a view of practitioners who are able to think critically and reflectively and apply these abilities to the tasks required of a social worker. Attention has focused on attracting 'higher calibre' candidates into social work, and Step Up was one attempt to do so, but a focus is also needed on how best to ease their transition from student to beginning practitioner (see Sharpe et al., 2011 and Carpenter et al., 2012) as well as on the substance of a curriculum designed to prepare someone to function in a context where knowledge and understanding are not fixed but rather fluid and unpredictable.

Casson (1982) still provides the most comprehensive exploration of the theoretical basis for acquiring and applying knowledge in social work education that has been conducted in England even though it is over 30 years since his work was published. His thesis is well argued and his conclusions are as relevant today as they were then. He demonstrates how the preferred model of professional education in general is one based on the assumption that students will develop their own theories of practice. Casson questioned whether this was feasible within a social work course and suggested that it

might be preferable to teach one theory of practice to enable students to acquire a higher level of competency. While it may be difficult to achieve the consensus required, it would seem to be a route worthy of consideration. Moriarty and Manthorpe (2012 and 2013) conducted a scoping review to inform the review of social work qualifying curriculum recommended by the Social Work Reform Board. They reviewed the evidence and concluded that while there was a consensus about the skills and knowledge required of newly qualified social workers there was an urgent need for an evidence-based curriculum to be developed that reflected contemporary practice and context. So clearly, work is needed on what is taught and how it is taught across all social work courses and not just Step Up. But the findings from this evaluation also indicate that it may be useful to pay some attention to what has been learnt about instructional skills in other professions.

The feedback from Cohort 1 was consistently more positive from two of the regional partnerships. Trainees in the Eastern and East Midlands studied with Manchester Metropolitan University; the University was responsible for accreditation and delivery of the course in both areas. It would be interesting to know if aspects of the way MMU designed these courses contributed to the more favourable response by trainees. Elements of what follows were present in other regional partnerships but it may have been the particular configuration that was responsible – or not. The curriculum was jointly developed with, and reviewed by, the regional partnerships to ensure that links to practice were both current and relevant. MMU also worked closely with practice educators on the programme, providing them with access to the entire curriculum, advising them on how the online materials related to practice issues and on work that could be allocated to trainees to help them focus on particular units and assessment tasks. Did a programme structure focusing on two placements where units were designed to reflect the trainees' developing knowledge and understanding make a difference? And to what extent, if any, did an online curriculum that required trainees to research issues in practice and relate this to the academic curriculum, alongside activities leading to discussion of issues with practice educators and skilled colleagues, provide greater insights and confidence? It was beyond the scope of this part of the evaluation to delve further into this area but it highlights the need for further exploration of the training methods that were deployed across the different models in place for Cohort 1 and now for Cohort 2.

It is important to recognise that this training route into social work moved from idea into reality in less than a year and required a high level of collaboration and effort on the part of a number of individuals and agencies. The trainees have comments, compliments and concerns about their experiences but that would be expected of a totally new approach to training. Overall, their responses have been generally positive. It is worth heeding the advice provided by Kanouse (1984):

...when people combine information, they weigh negative information more heavily than positive; i.e., that the whole is evaluated more negatively than the average of its parts. (p1)

The responses received at T1 and T2 from trainees in Cohort 2 indicate a higher level of satisfaction with their experience. A direct relationship between partnerships and HEIs is now the dominant model and it is hoped that this will reduce the number of complaints relating to poor communication and other irritants that existed in the triangular relationships experienced by those in Cohort 1. As with any programme Step Up has taken time to embed and it will take more time to mature. Despite the reported deficits it shows every sign of having supported many good newly qualified social workers into the profession and to be attracting a far more favourable response from the second cohort of trainees. Both of these factors provide evidence of the emergence of a programme capable of making an even more significant contribution to social work in the future.

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